26 NFL DRAFT

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THE PERFECT PLAN

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BY GREG BISHOP

* *By the way, he's not as surprised as you are*

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LINEUP

CLOSE TO HOME
Ohio State wide receiver Carnell Tate has a big future. Alas, according to our mock draft, it'll be with the Browns.

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

One of A Kind

WHY IS NO ONE TRYING TO REPLICATE THE TWO-WAY SUCCESS THAT MAKES SHOHEI OHTANI SO GREAT AND SO POPULAR?

BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO

BASEBALL IS famously a copycat sport. The relief ace, the infield shift, batting your best hitter second—all these strategies, initially curiosities, eventually spread across the game. And yet the most amazing thing happening in baseball these days is limited to Los Angeles, where since his 2018 arrival from Nippon Professional Baseball, Dodgers DH-slash-starting pitcher Shohei Ohtani makes history nearly every time he takes the field. Most pros both hit and pitched as kids. So why is the two-way star seemingly a one-off?

"I do think it starts with the fact that there has been one person in the history of baseball who has been super successful doing it," points out Royals GM J.J. Picollo, whose team employs one of the few other active players with a shot. "The rest have not been good enough at both to sustain it. So ... it's really hard to do."

A handful of players over the past decade or so have given this a go. Right-handed pitcher Michael Lorenzen, who played both ways at Cal State–Fullerton, got into 29 games as an outfielder for the Reds in 2019. The Rays let lefthander Brendan McKay and minor league second baseman Jake Cronenworth, who had both pitched and hit in college, try to do both that same year, but neither lasted long.

The most obvious current candidate is probably Kansas City's outfield prospect Jac Caglianone, 23, who slugged .760 and struck out 10.3 batters per nine innings in his three seasons at Florida. But even he has had to pick a lane as a pro. The Royals took him with the sixth pick of the 2024 draft and made him a full-time hitter.

"It wasn't that we were against him being a two-way guy," says Picollo. "We clearly liked him better as an amateur as a hitter than we did as a pitcher, but it wasn't that we disliked him as a pitcher. Our thought with it initially was, *Let's just make sure he focuses on hitting, and if he's hitting the ball well at some point, then we can think about him pitching.*" (That's the only order that makes any real sense, even for someone with a stronger pedigree on the mound: Hitting relies so much on developing a mental catalog of how pitches move that a player cannot afford to concentrate first on pitching and lose a year or two of repetitions at the plate.)

As it turned out, if Caglianone had actually hit just a bit worse last year, he might be a two-way player today: The Royals had him long tossing early in 2025 and were planning to give him a chance on the mound halfway through the Double A season. Instead, he tore apart Texas League pitching, got

MR. DO-IT-ALL
Ohtani has three seasons in which he had at least a 3.4 WAR on the hill and at the plate. No other player has done it once.

himself promoted to Triple A by mid-May and was in the majors in June. "We thought if he's going to spend time in the minor leagues, then maybe we have the time to help him develop as a pitcher," says Picollo. "He just moved so quickly that we didn't have the time to do that."

Caglianone seems happy enough with that outcome, although Picollo admits the team worried about what specializing would do to him emotionally. "I think there is a little bit of a mental side of this," Picollo says. "[Two-way] players lose some of their identity when you don't let them do both."

In nearly every other way, though, the risks of doing both outweigh the benefits, at least from the team's perspective. Most important is the question of injury. The nightmare scenario is that your two-way star gets hurt as a pitcher, and then you lose him as a hitter, too. Dodgers manager Dave Roberts acknowledged last year that there are times he worries Ohtani's pursuit of greatness on the mound will rob him of greatness at the plate. "There is a cost," Roberts said.

Less dramatically, the player might just get tired. Last season, Ohtani's first doing both for the Dodgers since his second elbow reconstruction in 2023, his offensive numbers were markedly worse surrounding his starts. Ohtani made 14 appearances on the mound, with a 2.87 ERA in 47 innings, and he hit .282 and slugged .622 in 2025, best in the National League, with a walk-to-strikeout ratio of 0.58. But on the days he pitched, those offensive numbers dipped to .214, .536 and 0.40, respectively; on the days immediately following his starts, they were even worse: .147, .294 and 0.17. And the pattern continued into the playoffs. He spent most of the 2025 World Series insisting that his offensive slump earlier in the postseason was not tied to how much work he was getting as a pitcher.

There are also structural problems, some of which sound small but do affect everyone. In spring training, sometimes Ohtani misses pitchers' fielding practice so he can take batting practice. On his start days, his warmup precludes his attendance at the hitters' meeting. When he was returning as a pitcher, the team did not want to lose him in the lineup, so instead of sending him on a standard minor league rehab assignment, the Dodgers reshuffled the rest of their pitchers to accommodate a series of one- and two-inning major league starts by Ohtani as he regained strength. This is all worth it if you are dealing with the best player in the history of the sport. But what if it's anyone else?

Picollo thinks the next two-way star might pitch in relief, so it's easier to manage his workload. But that adds even more logistical issues. For example, if a player starts a game on the mound and also as the DH, the team can replace him at pitcher and keep him in at designated hitter. Not so for a reliever: When he comes out of the game, the team loses the DH. And then there are also simpler questions about how he could warm up in the bullpen without disrupting his at-bats, although Ohtani famously managed that in the championship game of the 2023 World Baseball Classic, which he closed for Team Japan.

The other element that separates Ohtani from the field is the leverage he held. Ohtani was already considered a top prospect as an amateur, and he announced as a high school senior that he would jump directly to MLB as a pitcher rather than playing in NPB first, as most Japanese players do. The Nippon Ham Fighters took him with the first pick in the 2012 draft anyway, and convinced him to stay by promising to let him play both

THE RISKS OF DOING BOTH OUTWEIGH THE BENEFITS, FROM THE TEAM'S PERSPECTIVE.

FROM LEFT: ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES; WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

BAT MEN
While Lorenzen (opposite) pulled double duty for the Reds, K.C. has kept former Gator Caglianone off the mound as a professional.

ways. Once he showed he could succeed at both disciplines professionally, American teams clamored to let him keep doing it.

Is there even a world in which another player could force an organization's hand like that? Picollo tries to picture the situation. It would be hard for any other international amateur, especially coming out of Latin America, where players tend to sign at 16. As for drafted players, Picollo muses, "It's really, I don't want to say far-fetched, but there could be a scenario..." He imagines the clear first pick, coming out of a major conference, telling the team holding that selection that he will not sign if they don't let him do both. "I think they could hold some leverage in who drafts them to get the opportunity to do it," he says. "I'm just not sure who that player [would be]."

When you add all that up, it's not so incredible that there isn't more than one two-way star. It's incredible that there is even one. □

SCORECARD: GOLF

WELCOME BACK

AFTER A SIX- DECADE ABSENCE, THE PGA RETURNS TO A NEW-LOOK ARONIMINK

BY JOE PASSOV

IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE to think that Aronimink Golf Club, host to the PGA Championship beginning on May 14, feels overlooked. Located in the leafy western Philadelphia suburb of Newtown Square, the club is no stranger to lofty rankings and hosting significant tournaments, but because the region's competitors are so strong—looking at you, Pine Valley, Merion and Philadelphia Cricket Club—Aronimink can seem like an afterthought. That's about to change.

For the first time since the 1962 PGA Championship, a men's major is returning to "the Mink," an honor long overdue. Why the protracted gap? For starters, it's never easy snaring a U.S. Open or a PGA. But a more subtle factor also pervaded. For decades, the golf course earned respect and admiration without inspiring awe. That would have disappointed—and even astonished—its architect, Donald Ross.

"I intended to make this my masterpiece, but not until today did I realize that I built better than I knew," proclaimed Ross on a return visit 20 years after he designed Aronimink in 1928. That's some serious praise from the man many deem the best golf architect ever.

In the years since his glowing assessment, the course gradually changed from what Ross had built due to a series of minor tweaks to the architecture. In 2015, the club summoned Gil Hanse, who happened to live all of 15 minutes away in Malvern, Pa., to assess its layout. Building upon the stellar efforts of restoration specialist Ron Prichard a few years earlier, Hanse, design partner Jim Wagner, associate Jaeger Kovich and their field crew known as "the Cavemen" brought back the masterpiece that Ross had delivered.

"We are truly authentic to what Ross intended," says Jeff Kiddie, Aronimink's head golf pro. "We've worked hard to keep and embrace the Ross roots. And even though it was an enormous property for 1928—300 acres—it's pretty intimate compared to some current tournament venues. There's not one hole that's separated from others by forests and wetlands. You'll hear the roars."

Hanse's team thinned trees considerably, widened fairways by an average of 20%, expanded green surfaces and reinstalled freeform tees. Most visually impactful, however, was the bold decision to resurrect the original Ross bunkering scheme. Hanse added approximately 100 bunkers, bringing the number to north of 170, most of them in clusters of three to five. Not all were put back in their original locations.

"We really focused on the original Donald Ross design character," says Hanse, who added length and moved many of the bunker clusters into positions more appropriate for today's long hitters.

Restored bunkers figure prominently at one of Aronimink's most striking holes, the 425-yard, par-4 11th, which eases slightly uphill, past a phalanx of bunkers, and concludes in a markedly elevated green guarded by more traps left, right and long. After Hanse's handiwork, the bunker count on 11 soared from five to 20. "I don't know if we've ever been involved with a hole with so many bunkers," he says.

Unusually, the shortest holes are the toughest at Aronimink. "The

DAVE EVENSON/PGA OF AMERICA/GETTY IMAGES

par-3s are definitely the meat of the course," says Jordan Spieth, who would complete a career Grand Slam with a win at this PGA Championship. "They'll force you to feed 4- and 5-irons into difficult hole locations."

The 242-yard, par-3 8th ranked as the hardest hole relative to par in two PGA Tour events held at the Mink in 2010 and 2011, and it reigned terror as the third toughest par-3 on the entire Tour in both of those years. Playing downhill and over water, the hole features a green that's difficult to hit. "The angle that it sits at where the green runs from front left to back right is just sneaky great architecture," says Kiddie. "Especially for righthanders, if you pull it a little, it's going to miss the green long. If you leave the face a little bit open, it's going to be in that front-right bunker. The putting surface doesn't leave easy two-putts, either."

Another longish short hole fraught with liquid peril is the 229-yard 17th. But even if it played from 129 yards, if the hole is cut on the left front of what should be a firm green, birdies would be scarce. Different hole locations will offer risk/reward drama.

As with any classic Donald Ross design, the quality and complexity of the greens stand out. Piecing together the green puzzles is critical to success. "Aronimink is a good test because of the severity of the greens," says Spieth. "To make

BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

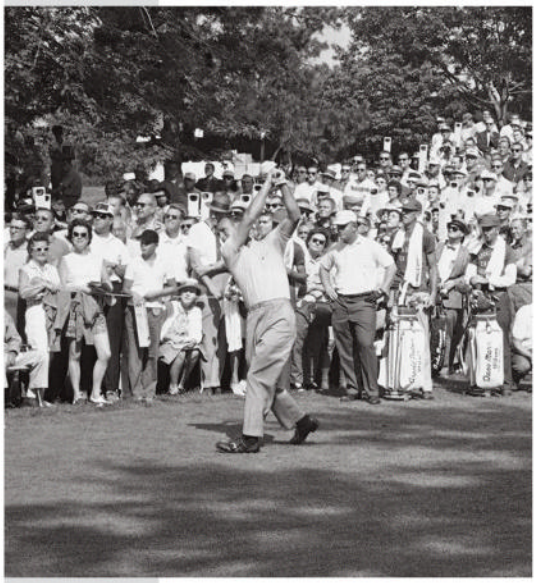
MINK TOLL
Before its renovation, the Ross course brought the field to its knees in the 1962 PGA, which Player (right) won at two under par.

birdies, you have to feed it in off the slopes or make big, breaking putts."

Aronimink's tournament history doesn't stretch as long or wide as Merion's, but it glitters nonetheless. That 1962 PGA Championship qualifies as a classic. Gary Player edged Bob Goalby—they were the only two players under par—and Jack Nicklaus to win his third major. Arnold Palmer, who had won two of the season's first three majors (and was second in the other), finished 10 strokes back.

At the 1977 U.S. Amateur, John Fought bested a field that included future major winners Hal Sutton, Jeff Sluman, Sandy Lyle and Scott Simpson, trouncing Doug Fischesser in the final 9 and 8. Aronimink also staged the 2003 Senior PGA Championship and the 2010 and 2011 AT&T National. Post-restoration events include the 2018 BMW Championship, won by Keegan Bradley at 20 under par, and the 2020 Women's PGA Championship.

As to the eye-popping low scores posted at the 2018 BMW Championship—pay them no heed. The course's strategic features and much of its challenge were neutered by epic rainfall that drenched the area before and during the tournament. At the 2020 Women's PGA Championship, only eight golfers bettered par for the duration.



G.I. BLUES
Arnie's Army had little to cheer about in 1962, when Palmer was tamed by the course that could host a major win for Rose (below).

"ARONIMINK IS A GOOD TEST BECAUSE OF THE SEVERITY OF THE GREENS," SAYS SPIETH.

So who does Aronimink favor? "We're not so long that it's just a bomber's golf course, and we're not so tight that it's just for straight hitters," says Kiddie. "This course rewards good all-around players. It's going to be spring rough, so staying out of it is a must. We also have big putting surfaces, so you're going to have some longer putts. Somebody that's a great lag putter will prosper. I think anybody could win."

Aside from the obvious picks of Scottie Scheffler and Rory McIlroy, the dark horse choice could be 45-year-old Justin Rose, who thrives in majors and crushes it in Philadelphia. Not only did he lift the trophy at Aronimink in 2010, but he finished second there in 2018 and also captured the 2013 U.S. Open at nearby Merion. Don't be surprised if Rose blossoms and Aronimink dazzles in this springtime PGA Championship. □

FROM LEFT: ERICK W. RASCO; BILL INGRAHAM/AP

JOEL
EMBIID

BROOKE
HENDERSON

JULIUS
RANDLE

SKECHERS
HANDS FREE
Slip-ins

WE ALL WENT HANDS FREE.

HARRY
KANE

RICKEA
JACKSON

MATT
FITZPATRICK

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SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

BELOW BOARD?

A NEW NETFLIX DOC DELVES INTO A CHESS SCANDAL THAT TOOK A BIZARRE TURN

BY MARK BECHTEL

GREGORY FISHER/IMAGN IMAGES (LOUISVILLE); COURTESY OF NETFLIX (POSTER)

THE FIRST three minutes or so of *Chess Mates*, a new installment of Netflix's *Untold* sports documentary series, are largely a milquetoast affair laying out the premise of the film: that in 2022, the world's best player, Magnus Carlsen, was beaten by an obviously inferior competitor, Hans Niemann, whom many suspected of cheating.

Then, for the first of many times, someone (in this case Piers Morgan) utters the phrase that came to dominate the discourse around the affair: *anal beads*. Game on.

Niemann was 19 at the time, one of the game's young players who took advantage of the rise in online play when COVID-19 hit. (The sport also got another huge bump with the release of another Netflix show, *The Queen's Gambit*, later in 2020.) He's presented as about as anti-establishment as you can get, dropping f-bombs left and right on Twitch streams. His talking head interviews don't exactly undercut that notion. "What price do you pay for genius?" he asks. "That's probably why I was never normal." He also reminds us that nice guys finish last. (What he lacks in decorum he makes up for in self-awareness, it seems.)

Carlsen, meanwhile, is a stoic Norwegian who says things like, "I don't consider myself remarkable." But at the board, he is. So when Niemann beats him twice face-to-face, eyebrows are raised. After the second loss, when he played an obscure opening that Niemann claims he just so happened to have studied earlier that day, Carlsen rage-quits the tournament with a cryptic tweet apparently accusing Niemann of receiving outside assistance.

It turns out that Niemann had a

WATCH

MARCHING INTO MADNESS

If you're going to do a fly-on-the-wall series, there'd better be some interesting things going on between those walls. With Pat Kelsey *(left)* around, you never have to worry about that. The Louisville basketball coach is the focus of *Marching Into Madness*, a five-part SI TV series streaming on SI.com and the SI YouTube channel. When he's not dancing shirtless in the locker room, he's often screaming himself hoarse. (Not in a toxic Bob Knight kind of way; it's more of a charming Chris Farley van-down-by-the-river way.)

Madness follows the Cardinals through this season, but it also goes back three years, to when Kelsey was putting up huge win totals at the College of Charleston. The college hoops landscape has changed radically since then, and seeing the magnetic Kelsey adapt to not only those changes but also to his new surroundings makes for mesmerizing viewing. □

MAHMUD HAMS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (CHESS)

REMATCHING UP
The two rivals faced off at the 2025 World Rapid and Blitz Championships, an event won by Carlsen (above left).

history of cheating online, to which he confessed after beating Carlsen. But cheating online is a whole lot easier than cheating at an over-the-board event, where players are wanded like airline passengers who set off TSA alarms.

That all raises the question: *If he did it, how?* Enter the anal beads, which theoretically could be wired to convey moves. (Other theories involved Niemann removing a cavity from a tooth and inserting a device that would give him electrical shocks.)

Niemann plays the victim card, but it's hard not to feel like he's got a point. The basis of the case against him was solely that Carlsen was too good to lose. And the more Carlsen talks about the incident and about Niemann, the more the nice guy facade starts to show some fissures. (Niemann, bless his heart, doesn't change, lobbing zingers like, "Even [Carlsen's] friends don't like him.")

This being chess, the doc has to rely heavily on interviews as opposed to action clips, but it is very well put together—especially when Carlsen visits Washington Square Park in New York City to take on the grizzled hustlers who play there. And it does evolve into a fascinating character study.

Thanks to the unsavory accusations, talk show hosts and the non-chess community at large had a field day. "That's what my whole life and my accomplishments and all my work has been boiled down to," Niemann says. "F---ing anal beads." Yes, it was a controversy that was ripe for a laugh, but also, as *Chess Mates* shows, worthy of a serious discussion as well. □

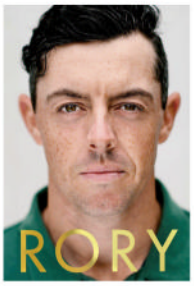
Scan the QR code above to be taken to the Sports Illustrated *YouTube channel, where you can stream all five episodes of* March Into Madness.

THE BIGGEST bang made by an Alan Shipnuck book has to be his biography of Phil Mickelson, in which Lefty did himself no favors by expressing his opinion on the increasing Saudi influence in the sport (favorable, never mind the murder of a journalist). Because of that, Rory McIlroy told Shipnuck in no uncertain terms he wanted nothing to do with a bio project.

Turns out McIlroy didn't have much to worry about. It's not that Shipnuck pulls any punches. It's that McIlroy is a much more subtle character, one who rarely courts controversy.

Still, there's plenty of sizzle here. *Rory* tells the story of McIlroy's golf career, which turns into a 11-year quest to complete his Grand Slam. The other narrative is how a kid who quit school at 16 became such a respected, thoughtful voice in the sport—as Shipnuck calls him, a man in full. It's a great ride, and we're lucky Shipnuck, who's covered McIlroy for two decades, is there to take us inside the ropes. □

READ



RORY
by Alan Shipnuck

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Russell Wilson
Super Bowl Champion and
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"I support the V Foundation because it gives 100% of donations directly to lifesaving cancer research. The only way to achieve Victory Over Cancer® is to give everything we've got."
Learn more at v.org
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BALL CARRIER
Mientkiewicz, who held onto the final out of the 2004 Series, incurred the wrath of Sox fans, who he said threatened his family.

SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

GOLD RUSH

EVERYONE WANTS TO GET THEIR HANDS ON THE OLYMPIC-WINNING HOCKEY PUCK

BY MARK BECHTEL

WHEN JACK HUGHES scored the goal that gave the U.S. the gold medal at the 2026 Milan Cortina Olympics *(page 56)*, he understandably wanted to keep the puck. Alas, by the time he was done dogpiling with his teammates, it was in the hands of the International Ice Hockey Federation. And the governing body had other plans for it: The puck is now on display at the Hockey Hall of Fame. In Toronto.

That led to some verbal shots from the Devils' Hughes, but with nothing in writing about who owns what it's a legally gray area. Normally it's generally accepted that a player's uniform or equipment used in a historic moment can be kept. But a puck (or a ball) is a different story.

What complicates matters further is the relationship (or lack thereof) between Hughes and the IIHF. Says Benjamin Joelson, a partner at Akerman and a leading litigator in high-end collectible cases, "Normally, the Devils could say, 'We're going to give you this puck. It's a big moment, so you can have it.' But here you have a hockey federation that isn't obligated to Hughes to give him ownership."

That's not to say that a team is going to just hand over a valuable piece of memorabilia to a player. In 2004, the Red Sox got into a snit with first baseman Doug Mientkiewicz over the ball from the final out of Boston's first World Series win in 86 years. The Sox later sued the player before Mientkiewicz, who had no plans to sell the ball, donated it to the Baseball Hall of Fame. (Three years later, Boston reliever Jonathan Papelbon hung onto the final out of the Sox' World Series championship, then preempted any future debate over his ownership by saying his dog ate it, a move no doubt applauded by sixth-graders everywhere.)

Possession of valuable gear isn't always contentious, though. When the Cubs broke their 108-year World Series drought in 2016, Anthony Rizzo gave the ball—valued at around $3 million—to Chicago owner Tom Ricketts.

Back in 1974, with Hank Aaron sitting on 714 home runs, singer Sammy Davis Jr. made the rounds in the Braves' clubhouse and offered every reliever $25,000 for the ball if they caught No. 715. (Davis wanted to use it in his Vegas act and then give it back to Aaron.) Atlanta's Tom House caught the record breaker; despite the fact that $25K was nearly twice his salary, he handed it to Aaron on the spot.

Said House in 2021, "If you asked anyone on the field that day if they would have caught the home run, they would have done exactly what I did."

Maybe there's a lesson in that. □

DAMIAN STROHMEYER

FACES IN THE CROWD

BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com.**

AIDEN BRYANT ▸ Sport: Track and Field ▸ Hometown: Clifton Springs, N.Y.

Aiden, a senior at Midlakes High, swept the NYSPHSAA indoor titles in the triple jump (49' 5") and long jump (24' 7¼"). He set a state record with a 51' 10" triple jump in the event qualifier. The 2024–25 Gatorade New York Boys Track and Field Player of the Year, Aiden won the 2025 Nike outdoor national title in the triple jump and has a total of eight indoor and outdoor state championships.

MADISON GRAVES ▸ Sport: Hockey ▸ Hometown: Upper Saddle River, N.J.

Madison, a sophomore goalie at Immaculate Heart Academy, stopped 31 shots in a 3–1 win over Morristown-Beard as the Blue Eagles became the first girls hockey team from Bergen County to win the state title. The recipient of the tournament's Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau MVP award, she shut out Randolph and Hoboken in the first two rounds and finished the season with a .935 save percentage.

MAURICE GRABOWSKI ▸ Sport: Swimming ▸ Hometown: Neu-Ulm, Germany

Grabowski, a senior at Lynn University, won the Division II championship in the 50-yard freestyle (18.97), the first individual swimming title in school history. He then swam leadoff in the 200-yard medley relay and helped the Fighting Knights set a D-II record (1:24.15) and win the national title in the event. This season he won four Sunshine State Conference titles in the 50 free, 100 free, 100 back and 100 fly.

GYMNASTICS

Take 10

▸ **WHEN MORGAN PRICE** transferred to Arkansas last spring, she had a goal: land her Yurchenko 1.5 consistently. She did more than that. In a February meet against Kentucky, Price stuck the vault and scored a perfect 10, becoming the first gymnast to do so in any event in the Gymbacks' 24-year history.

Firsts are familiar territory for Price. At Fisk University, she was a founding member of the first HBCU gymnastics program. In 2024 she became the first HBCU athlete to win a USA Gymnastics collegiate national title. A year later, she became the first HBCU gymnast to score a perfect 10.

Price had learned how to be a role model at Fisk, and she carried that with her when she joined her older sister, Frankie, at Arkansas. Morgan, Frankie and youngest sister Kristin ran gymnastics and cheerleading minicamps last year; they plan to extend that effort and open their own facility in Nashville—not far from their hometown of Lebanon, Tenn.—this summer. "We want to give young girls dreams and opportunities to reach their goals," Price says. □

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF AIDEN BRYANT; COURTESY OF ALLISEN GRAVES; LYNN ATHLETICS; ARKANSAS ATHLETICS

Legal Notice

Attention: Farmers, Landscapers, Groundskeepers, Gardeners, and Others Exposed to Weed Killers

People Diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma (NHL)
Now or in the Future Could Receive $6,000 to $165,000 or More

This settlement will affect you even without a cancer diagnosis — unless you exclude yourself.

The settlement includes people exposed to **Roundup** or other weed killers in the U.S. before February 17, 2026. Lawsuits claim an ingredient in these weed killers causes non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a blood cancer that takes 10 to 15 years to appear. Monsanto denies wrongdoing but has agreed to pay up to $7.25 billion to settle these claims. The settlement will continue to pay claims for 17 to 21 years. Family members and representatives of deceased, minor, or incapacitated class members may also be included.

POTENTIAL SETTLEMENT BENEFITS

Claimant Type	Average Program Award (Based on age at diagnosis & NHL type)	Quick-Pay Option
Occupational Farmers, landscapers, groundskeepers, applicators	**$60,000 - $165,000**	Not eligible
Residential Home gardeners, others	**$20,000 - $40,000**	**$7,700 - $14,500** Faster payment for some early filers
Diagnosed with NHL at age 78+	**$10,000**	**$6,000**

You may qualify for additional payments if you have extraordinary medical needs or heavy home use, or for faster payments if you have extreme hardship.

YOUR OPTIONS

The Court will hold a hearing on **July 9, 2026**, to decide whether to approve the settlement. Court appointed lawyers represent you and are paid from the settlement. If you wish, you or your own lawyer may ask to appear and speak at the hearing at your own cost.

Option	What To Do	Deadline
Get Benefits	**If you have an NHL diagnosis:** Register by **January 5, 2027** (or 180 days after the Court approves the settlement, whichever is later). File a claim within 180 days after any appeals are resolved. **If you get NHL later:** No need to register now. File a claim within 6 years of diagnosis.	Varies
Exclude Yourself	The only way to keep all legal rights to sue Monsanto on your own. You get no money from this settlement.	**June 4, 2026**
Object to Settlement	Tell the Court why you don't like the settlement. The Court will consider objections before approval.	**June 4, 2026**

What You Give Up: If you stay in the settlement, you cannot sue Monsanto for any claims related to Roundup exposure. You give up the right to seek money to cover your losses (compensatory damages), for medical tests (medical monitoring), and to punish the company (punitive damages). If you are diagnosed with NHL but later qualify to exit the settlement—for example, you did not receive a payment within five years of eligibility, funding ran out before you were paid, or you rejected your award—you may sue for your losses, but not for punitive damages. If you are not diagnosed with NHL before the settlement ends, you get back all your legal rights. If you do nothing, you will be bound by the Court's decisions.

Learn More & Register for Benefits:

www.WeedKillerClass.com **1-888-403-8201**

HOOSIERS
15

NFL DRAFT PREVIEW

Sports Illustrated

The future is now for hundreds of NFL hopefuls—and for the 32 teams which will decide **WHO LANDS WHERE** *when the draft is held in Pittsburgh. Two fascinating prospects, a quarterback and a running back, will be the talk of the Class of 2026*

SOOBUM IM/GETTY IMAGES

MR. IMP

BY **GREG BISHOP**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

GROOMING BY
BAILEE WOLFSON AT SEE MANAGEMENT

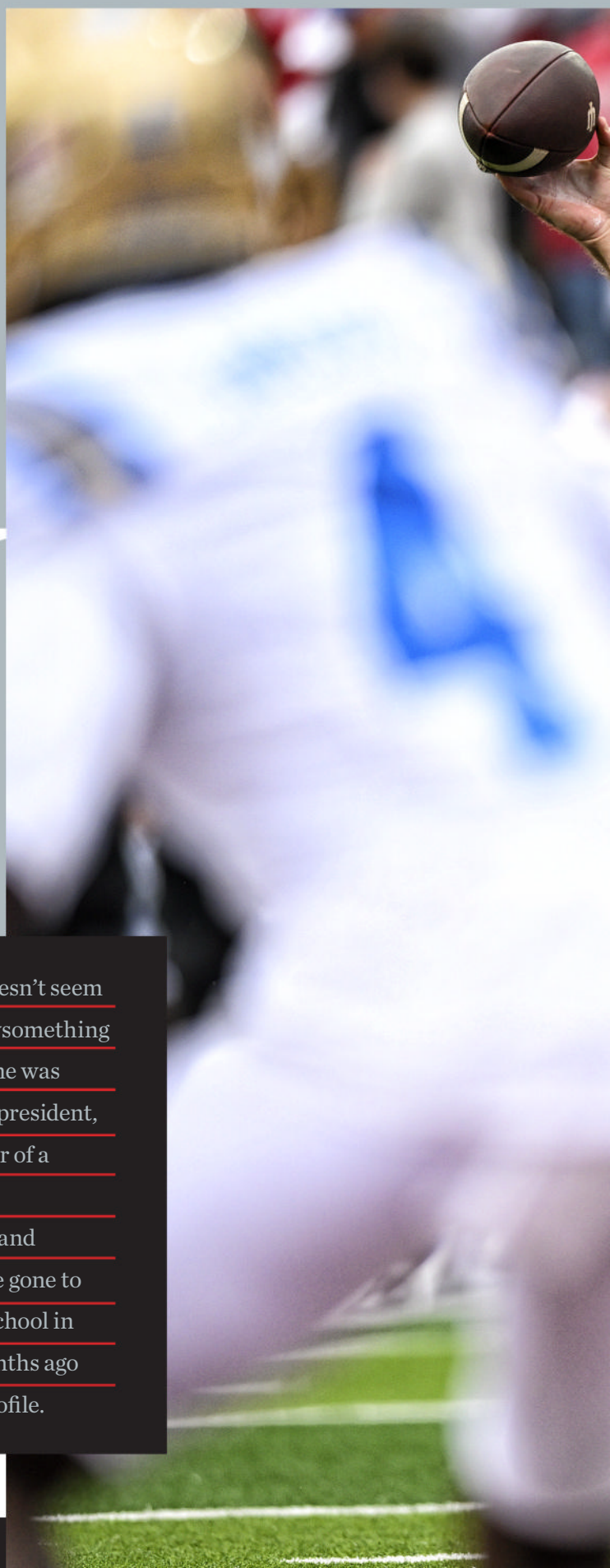
26NFL DRAFT

UNKNOWN TRANSFER TO HEISMAN WINNER TO CERTAIN NO. 1 PICK: THAT'S THE PATH ***FERNANDO MENDOZA*** *TRAVELED OVER THE LAST YEAR. BUT HIS STORYBOOK RISE IS ONLY PART OF WHY HE'S ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING QB PROSPECTS EVER*

ROBABLE

26 NFL DRAFT

W

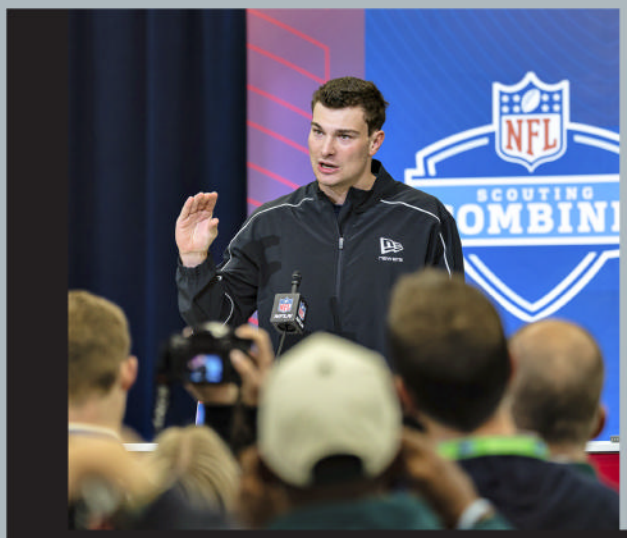


WHEN YOU look at his résumé, Fernando Mendoza doesn't seem all that different from any other high-achieving twentysomething ready to make their mark on the world. In high school he was an elite student (4.86 GPA), class VP, campus ministry president, the honors program's social media director and founder of a nonprofit that spreads awareness for youth in need.

He interviewed Miami's mayor on a podcast he hosted and organized humanitarian efforts in Cuba. He could have gone to Yale, but instead earned a degree from Cal's business school in three years and then got to work on an MBA. A few months ago he declared himself "open to work" on his LinkedIn profile.

THE DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES
Mendoza threw 41 touchdown passes in his 16 games at Indiana—11 more than he had in his 20 previous college games

JAMES BLACK/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES



After seeing the strides Mendoza made in his first three games as a Hoosier, his performance coach called a friend: "Fernando's gonna* WIN THE F------ HEISMAN *this year."

Of course, there is nothing typical about Fernando Mendoza. Unlike everyone else who took 12 AP courses in high school, he's a former two-star recruit who somehow turned himself into a Heisman Trophy winner. That LinkedIn status change? It was his tongue-in-cheek announcement that he was entering this year's NFL draft, where he is all but assured of being the top pick. Mendoza defies simple categorizations and easy comparisons. His intelligence, curiosity and academic achievements make him an ideal candidate for almost any profession. But those assets can be complicated in his chosen craft. Modern NFL evaluators analyze quarterbacks in ways and with methodology far different from their predecessors, yet they can still cling to stubborn, outdated stereotypes. Only in this specific evaluation cauldron can broad interests and a strong mind be seen as a potential cloud over potential.

Mendoza didn't set out to become a riddle atop a magical wave. It just happened. Not, to be clear, by accident. But beyond even Mendoza's wildest expectations. He became the probable No. 1 pick because he is refined in ways most of his peers cannot yet fathom. But his on-field skill set is perhaps the least refined part of him. That's both his appeal *and* the source of lingering doubts.

Another thing that sets Mendoza apart from the typical draft pick: the air of wisdom that he carries. Listen to his interviews. Watch his video clips. Notice what this prospect reveals about himself.

Mendoza talks and thinks like a Stoic, with a worldview seemingly rooted in an ancient Greek and Roman philosophy that dates back to around 300 B.C. He follows Ryan Holiday, a modern-day stoicism influencer, on Instagram, devouring the acclaimed author's books and listening to Holiday's podcasts while driving or in the shower. He's digging into the writings of Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Roman emperor who you might think of as the Ryan Holiday of the second century. Mendoza talks about the importance of discipline … delayed gratification … controlling only what he can directly impact … processes

FROM LEFT: MICHAEL HICKEY/GETTY IMAGES; TODD OWYOUNG/NBC/GETTY IMAGES

over outcomes ... avoiding the hazards of complacency. As our mid-March interview shifts into these ancient weeds, he says, "Great reminder. Just finished reading [another] book. It's time to hop back into that [stoic] mindset again." His voice begins to trail off, but not before he adds, quietly, "Especially with so much chaos going on."

It's almost possible to see Mendoza's mind churn, one thought colliding with dozens of others, always a brief pause before he answers. "Stoicism is a great belief and study of humans, of what really matters," he says. "If you are wise and have your pillars, you have a clear aiming point. Quarterback is cerebral. And I'm always ready to learn, ready to ... increase my neuroplasticity on stoicism."

How's that for a new Mendoza Line? Hence the riddle. Many NFL evaluators see this past season's fairy tale at Indiana—the national championship in his first year after transferring from Cal, the Heisman, the transformation from unknown to surefire No. 1—and wonder if Mendoza can sustain a story that appears, on the surface, more like a scripted movie than real life.

VICTORY TOUR
After celebrating the natty, Mendoza tossed footballs at The Tonight Show *and spoke—but didn't throw—at the NFL combine.*

Hence his first task, the one that will define everything post-fairy tale: To show that the truly improbable part of his career is ... *next*.

IN EARLY 2022, when he was a senior at Miami's Christopher Columbus High, Mendoza ranked between 134th and 140th on the lists that mattered most. Not as an overall college football prospect. That was his ranking among high school quarterbacks, all vying to start at one of 138 FBS programs.

Without a single Power 4 scholarship offer—even the nearest local nonpowerhouse, Florida International, rejected him—Mendoza committed to Yale. He changed the plan when Cal made him a late offer, injecting hope that only Mendoza himself could feel. He spent his redshirt freshman season wearing baseball caps and flashing decoy signals. His NFL draft status didn't yet exist, so he sought internships with real estate investment firms near campus.

That may be where the parallels to another unlikely quarterback transformation begin. Like Tom Brady's college stint working for Merrill Lynch, Mendoza's internship backup plan seemed like a step toward his most logical, most likely future. Until last fall, at least, when Mendoza entered the pantheon over which Brady presides: sports history's most dominant underdogs. TB12 echoes reverberate throughout Mendoza's story.

Like Brady, Mendoza believed in himself and his football ambitions when things like reason and statistics—he went 10–10 at Cal and finished the 2024 season ranked 36th in the country in passer rating—signaled delusion. Like Brady, Mendoza comes from a close family, steered by his parents, Fernando Sr. and Elsa. Like Brady, Mendoza leaned into faith and principles. Elsa often told Junior he wasn't what he was labeled, with those two measly stars. He asked if she considered him three-star. Elsa shook her head. Same for four. And five. "You're Fernando Mendoza," she told him.

Inadvertently, Brady even helped. An image Mendoza used to have on his Instagram page showcases the one player he most idolized. There's young Fernando, wearing Brady's Michigan jersey and a Wolverines helmet, even displaying an oddly similar tall and lean build. Mendoza saw some of himself in Brady. "The perfect guy to look up to," Mendoza says now. "Cerebral. He wasn't the fastest, wasn't the strongest; just super, super smart and a great leader, too."

Mendoza became a TB12 disciple. He sleeps eight hours a night, minimum. He read the book that explains Brady's methodologies. He can recite which foods (strawberries, seedless tomatoes) Brady avoids because he considers them inflammatory.

And, like Brady, Mendoza *knew*. One video for the wristband company TonyBandz, from July 2024, is often cited for an offhanded comment Mendoza made about not having time to date. But those citing that minor brick in his wider story missed the important thing Mendoza said that afternoon. That he *could* make the NFL *if* the next two college seasons went "really, really well."

As the draft nears, Mendoza understands that his story, from the outside, ranks among the most improbable in sports history. But that's to everyone else. "Did I know I was going to win a national championship or one of the prestigious awards? No idea," he says.

But improbable? "I don't think this is," Mendoza says, meaning to him and *at all*.

BRIAN SPURLOCK/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

26 NFL DRAFT

Fernando Mendoza gives insight on the most perfect plays from his perfect season and his goals for his rookie year. Scan the QR code to watch an exclusive SI video.

KOHJIRO KINNO

TO BETTER understand how Mendoza fits in the NFL, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED polled five talent evaluators—two general managers, one in each conference; one player personnel director; and two scouts, both of whom evaluated the QB in person.

All cited the same elite skills: accuracy on almost every type of throw; consistency in setting up receivers for runs after catches; no fear in launching attempts downfield; red-zone effectiveness (65.7 completion percentage in that area last season, with 27 touchdown passes and zero interceptions); anticipation; ball placement; toughness; clutch play in tense moments (he led game-winning, fourth-quarter drives, from behind, against Iowa, Oregon and Penn State); bounce-back ability (Mendoza struggled in each of those games, too); personality; quick release; compact motion; and intellect.

They also cited the same range of skills that Mendoza must continue to develop: accuracy on deep throws; arm talent (better than average, not elite yet); mobility; and sack avoidance. Both general managers and the pro personnel director noted that where and how Mendoza develops will define whether the improbable part of his career is next. Brady looms large in that conversation, too. The No. 1 pick is held by the Raiders, where Brady has an ownership stake and is reportedly becoming more involved in personnel decisions.

Mendoza and his many supporters note his proof of concept: 2025. His QB coach at Indiana, Chandler Whitmer, says Mendoza didn't strike him as a future pro when they started working together. They focused first on Mendoza's polish in the pocket; footwork, eye positioning, handling the chaos inherent in any play. After a few weeks, Whitmer saw Mendoza as "different and special" and bound for the NFL.

See, Mendoza *wanted* to be developed. That's why he chose Indiana. "Most coachable guy I've ever been around," Whitmer says.

Mendoza's most critical refinement started between his ears. "You can see it," Whitmer says. "Sometimes, his brain goes faster than his mouth." Bad plays, series or quarters could spiral him. His college career had unfolded in three stages: just happy to be at Cal, playing college football; heightened expectations, overthinking and overtoiling; letting go, working smarter and playing with more flow.

Mike Pawlawski, a retired NFL QB turned performance mindset coach, met Mendoza at Cal. Mendoza wasn't playing much but had a growth mindset. He asked more questions than the beat reporters and scribbled notes like his future depended on how many he wrote down.

They assessed Mendoza's patterns—in how he trained, or what happened inside his mind and body before clutch moments—and worked to break the ones that hindered him. Mendoza learned how to reset in the moment, be present and stay comfortable. That, Pawlawski says, is where Mendoza "really, really grew from Cal to Indiana."

"And he stepped into that situation at Indiana with a team that appreciated him and was going to give him room to grow," Pawlawski says. "That allowed him to utilize all these tools he'd amassed."

Pawlawski often disagreed with Golden Bears coaches who picked apart every Mendoza performance. They had no sense, he says, of what the kid could truly become. After only three games with the Hoosiers in 2025—and dozens of conversations with Mendoza—Pawlawski called a friend and said, "Fernando's gonna win the f---ing Heisman this year."

"He's improved a ton emotionally and cognitively," adds Pawlawski.

In the NFL, personal, emotional and cognitive growth matter only if improvements in those areas yield wins. Mendoza has those, too, from a walk-off throw to beat Penn State to the touchdown on a fourth-and-4 quarterback draw that sealed the Hoosiers' national championship triumph over Miami.

Mendoza ran to Indiana's sideline afterward and struck

"Did I know I was going to win a national championship or one of the prestigious awards? No idea," Mendoza says. But does he see his storybook evolution as improbable?

"I DON'T THINK THIS IS."

the Heisman pose. "Is this kid all right?" Whitmer wondered. Mendoza completed 72% of his passes in '25, for 3,535 yards and 41 touchdowns. He didn't throw any interceptions in the College Football Playoff. "That [pose] was probably the most overt moment of his life," Whitmer says.

Sports movies have been based on far less.

MOM'S WISE words—*You're Fernando Mendoza*—matter more than ever now. They matter because how NFL teams evaluate quarterbacks is changing. The always nebulous concept of what makes a prototypical signal-caller matters less than ever, because prospects begin development so early and schematics change so often. Fit—between a quarterback, offensive coaches and their scheme—has never been more important. Which is why evaluators rarely admit publicly that a prospect like Mendoza can somehow score "too high" on an intelligence test. The best offensive coaches in pro football care most about what makes Mendoza different, what separates him.

The Raiders have an elite young running back in Ashton Jeanty, an elite young tight end in Brock Bowers, a new center in free agent Tyler Linderbaum, a new head coach in offensive-minded Klint Kubiak and a trusted offensive coordinator in Andrew Janocko. It's a good time to have the top pick, because Las Vegas appears to fit with Mendoza as well as any franchise.

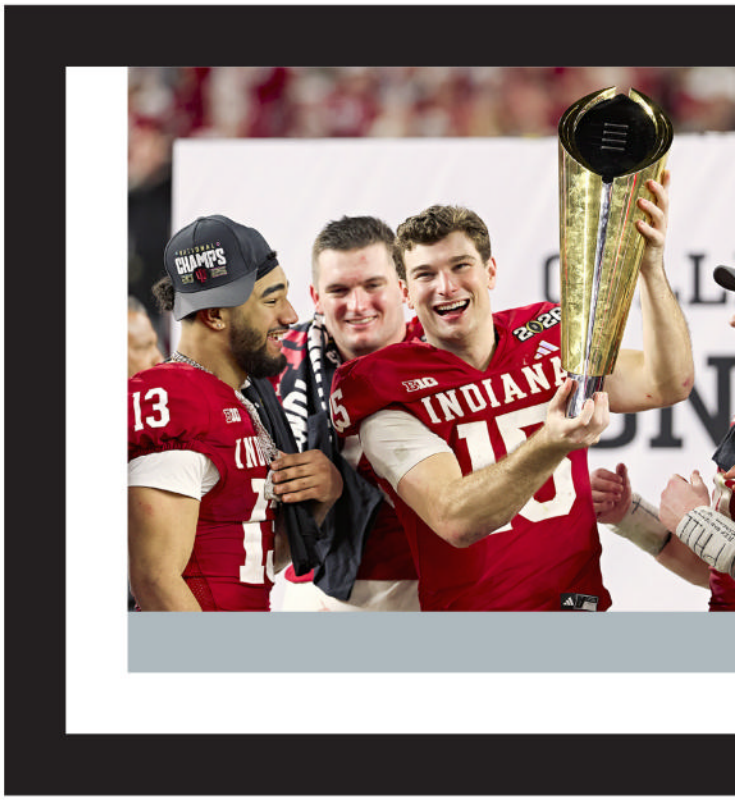
As perhaps the most unlikely No. 1 pick in NFL history, Mendoza sought both growth and refinement as the draft approached. He trained at the Excel Performance Center in Southern California. He won't resemble an entirely new QB at his first minicamps. He didn't throw at the combine, though he was expected to at Indiana's pro day on April 1. He chose to do that because he wanted to highlight the strengths of his teammates at Indiana who are also in the draft.

The seeds he's sowing now are expected to yield bigger gains in future months or even years. More than anything, that's reps. Only on-field experience will make Mendoza even more decisive. "Knowledge, as a weapon, will be big for him," says Whitmer, now Tampa Bay's quarterbacks coach. "Because, man, he is the most accurate quarterback I've been around. He was deadly because he put so much time into understanding every single concept. There was very little hesitation in his game."

Development, for Mendoza, may be easier than the second prong of his immediate ambitions. What makes NFL franchise quarterback the hardest job in sports is the position's inherent duality, the need for superstars to fit seamlessly into the locker room but also stand apart from teammates as a leader and franchise face. In public, Brady could come across as robotic or awkward. But teammates experienced the Brady who anchored locker rooms with his personality and humanity—more, even, than through his greatness.

Mendoza doesn't need to become Brady. But he must create a similar buy-in from his first NFL locker room. In a sport where smarts are sometimes viewed in more than one way, that task is far more complicated than it might sound.

And yet, Mendoza showcased his ability to blend and bolster in that lone season with the Hoosiers. Pawlawski, who spoke to Mendoza weekly in 2025, describes him as a human magnet, adding that his teammates at Cal wanted Mendoza to start more than his coaches did. "People should never, ever, take him for granted or underestimate Fernando Mendoza," Pawlawski says. "If they do, they don't understand him. He will never create his own limitations."



SIMON BRUTY

In our interview, Mendoza notes something he noticed in recent months, that many NFL coaches seem to view their college football counterparts as less intellectual than those who reach the pros. "There's sometimes a little bit of... ego, like, 'O.K., I can make this guy, more of a raw product, into a refined product,' " Mendoza says. "Although people would say, maybe, that's Sam Darnold... in reality, like we've seen how Sam's grown from his rookie year to, now, Super Bowl champion, one of the best in the league."

Mendoza says recent QB play proves that so-called prototypical pocket passers no longer automatically equate to readiness to play that position in the modern NFL. "I have so much more room to grow," he says, winding to a conclusion of sorts.

"Just because you fit that mold doesn't mean you're ready."

Human magnet, right? Flash back a couple months, to the night of the Heisman ceremony. There's a picture on Mendoza's Instagram page. It features him and several Hoosiers teammates in Times Square, celebrating his Heisman win. Look closely at his teammates' faces. Drink in the pure, almost childlike joy in their expressions. Then understand that they paid their own way, and that Mendoza only received limited tickets to the ceremony, so they couldn't be in the room for the big moment. But they still went. For *him*.

the larger tree all clad in the same color T-shirts. The colors correspond to their respective branches. There are flow charts. They came from Cuba, after the Castros overthrew the government. When Fernando gave part of his Heisman acceptance speech in Spanish, he spoke to *them*.

He saved his most poignant words for Mom. "You taught me that toughness doesn't need to be loud. It can be quiet and strong. It's choosing hope. It's believing in yourself when the world doesn't give you much reason to."

I wonder what Mendoza will make of this quote: *Hope is*

COMMAND PERFORMANCE
In the CFP national championship win over Miami, Mendoza displayed toughness and a knack for clutch plays, two traits that endeared him to his teammates and point to a bright NFL future.

Mom was always right, wasn't she? Elsa Mendoza played college tennis at Miami, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis nearly two decades ago, and never stopped instilling in Fernando all that he now displays on increasingly larger stages. Elsa invested in him, Fernando says, teaching him how to throw and taking him to speech therapy for the stutter that still surfaces occasionally. She'd set up obstacle courses in local parks, like *American Ninja Warrior*, and task Fernando with completing them—starting at age 8. "She spent so much time on me," he says. "It's insane."

They're part of a larger family, as the Mendoza Mafia is sometimes called. Reunions draw hundreds of relatives to the Biltmore in Coral Gables, members from each branch of

a discipline. His mind cycles. He speaks of needing inputs to get outputs. He gave up fried food last season, per the TB12 method. He tried giving up sugar, but his kryptonite—donuts—proved too strong.

Elsa taught Fernando what most miss about stoicism, too. It's not a passive philosophy, akin to giving up. A discipline. Intentional, daily progress, with no end point beyond a fortification of self and a letting go of all things—criticisms, falsehoods, draft statuses—we cannot control.

"It's the highest form of self-respect," Mendoza says. He sounds like Tom Brady. Or Marcus Aurelius. Better yet, he sounds like Fernando Mendoza, the riddle, already answered, with improbable still ahead. □

ERICK W. RASCO

1

RAIDERS

Fernando Mendoza

QB
INDIANA

The Heisman winner led the Hoosiers to a national title in January, and he checks every physical box. At 6'5" and 225 pounds, he has a strong arm, and he can scramble and extend plays.

2

JETS

David Bailey

EDGE
TEXAS TECH

With the next-best QB slated to go in the second half of the first round, New York turns its attention to defense. Bailey has the speed, strength and hand skills to beat blockers in a variety of ways.

3

CARDINALS

Francis Mauigoa

OT
MIAMI

Arizona filled one hole on its offensive line by signing free agent guard Isaac Seumalo to a three-year, $31.5 million deal. Here the Cardinals find a long-term solve at right tackle.

4

TITANS

Jeremiyah Love

RB
NOTRE DAME

Tennessee addressed enough of its needs on defense in free agency that it can now take the best player available. This dynamic playmaker should have massive, immediate impact.

5

GIANTS

Sonny Styles

LB
OHIO STATE

After signing Tremaine Edmunds from the Bears to a three-year deal to lead its linebacking corps, New York now has a veteran room that's ideal for an ascending talent like Styles.

FROM LEFT: JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES; NICK TRE. SMITH/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL CATERINA/IMAGN IMAGES; IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

2026

MOCK DRAFT

Bad news for fans of the forward pass: This board is light on franchise quarterbacks beyond the sure No. 1 pick, but it is **STRONG ON RUSHERS** who can make a QB's life miserable

BY DANIEL FLICK

6 BROWNS

Carnell Tate

WR
OHIO STATE

Cleveland needs a QB, but its picks are not well-positioned to take a signal-caller in the first round. The team also could use help at receiver and offensive tackle, and the value here at WR is better.

7 COMMANDERS

Caleb Downs

S
OHIO STATE

Despite investing heavily on defense in free agency, Washington still could improve on the back end, and the savvy, hard-hitting Downs will fit well alongside new pickup Nick Cross.

8 SAINTS

Arvell Reese

EDGE
OHIO STATE

New Orleans takes care of a major need on its defense by grabbing the versatile, athletic Reese. This Buckeye can wreck games as an off-ball linebacker and pass rusher.

9 CHIEFS

Mansoor Delane

CB
LSU

Kansas City is faced with a rebuild at cornerback after trading Trent McDuffie to the Rams and losing Jaylen Watson in free agency, and Delane is this draft's best option at the spot.

10 BENGALS

Rueben Bain Jr.

EDGE
MIAMI

Bain could go earlier—Tennessee and New Orleans are possibilities—but he'd be a true bargain here. He is a rugged pass rusher who can also set the edge against the run.

FROM LEFT: JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; JASON MOWRY/GETTY IMAGES; IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; ELLA HALL/LSU/UNIVERSITY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES

11

Miami seems to be in win-later mode, which will give the talented defensive back time to reacclimate after missing 2025 due to a torn ACL.

DOLPHINS

Jermod McCoy

CB TENNESSEE

12

Dallas had the worst pass defense in the NFL last year. Thieneman will give the unit greater flexibility and the ability to play three-safety sets.

COWBOYS

Dillon Thieneman

S OREGON

13

Matthew Stafford gets another weapon. Tyson may be the best route runner in this class, and he is fantastic after the catch.

RAMS

Jordyn Tyson

WR ARIZONA STATE

14

The 6'4", 320-pound lineman didn't allow a sack or quarterback hit this past season, and he is a mauling run blocker as well.

RAVENS

Olaivavega Ioane

OG PENN STATE

15

Mesidor, who will be 25 on draft day, had 12½ sacks last season and is the most pro-ready prospect in the second tier of pass rushers.

BUCCANEERS

Akheem Mesidor

EDGE MIAMI

16

Simpson has the accuracy, intangibles and arm talent to be a quality NFL starter. But in 2026 he will likely sit behind veteran Geno Smith.

JETS

Ty Simpson

QB ALABAMA

17

LIONS

Monroe Freeling

OT GEORGIA

After releasing longtime left tackle Taylor Decker, Detroit grabs his replacement. Freeling is athletic and agile, but made only 17 college starts. With experience, he could become a tremendous blindside protector for Jared Goff.

18

The 5'11", 186-pounder plays bigger than his size. Terrell is fiery, physical and has great route anticipation. He could start as a rookie.

VIKINGS

Avieon Terrell

CB CLEMSON

19

Carolina grabs the best tight end in the draft for QB Bryce Young. Sadiq's athleticism pops on tape, and he will be a matchup nightmare.

PANTHERS

Kenyon Sadiq

TE OREGON

20

Dallas needs linebackers, and the hard-nosed and physical Allen looks to have the skills and intelligence to become a long-term starter in the middle.

COWBOYS

CJ Allen

LB GEORGIA

21

Pittsburgh traded for Michael Pittman Jr., a possession receiver, and now adds Lemon, an explosive pass catcher who starred in the slot.

STEELERS

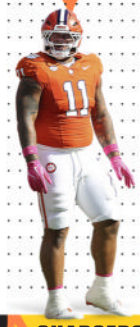
Makai Lemon

WR USC

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: BRIANNA PACIORKA/NEWS SENTINEL/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; STEVEN BISIG/IMAGN IMAGES; MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES (2); JEROME MIRON/IMAGN IMAGES; GARY COSBY JR/TUSCALOOSA NEWS/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX MARTIN/GREENVILLE NEWS/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES; JONATHAN BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES; GARY A. VASQUEZ/IMAGN IMAGES

26 NFL DRAFT

22



Los Angeles could use a new starting guard, but it also needs to get better at defensive tackle. Woods is adept at discarding blockers.

CHARGERS

Peter Woods

DT CLEMSON

23

EAGLES

Caleb Lomu

OT UTAH

Lomu is fleet-footed and fluid but needs to add some strength. Philly can afford to be patient with him, though. Star right tackle Lane Johnson, who had considered retirement, has announced he'll return for his 14th season.

24

He was sluggish at times, but at his best Proctor has the strength and physicality to stonewall rushers and displace run defenders.

BROWNS

Kadyn Proctor

OT ALABAMA

25

Faulk is 6'6" and 276 pounds, and he won't turn 21 until September. He has leadership qualities, long arms and a quick first step.

BEARS

Keldric Faulk

EDGE AUBURN

26

New head coach Joe Brady values receivers. Concepcion is a route technician with high-level speed and can play inside or outside.

BILLS

KC Concepcion

WR TEXAS A&M

27

He only began playing football in 2021, but his strong performance at the NFL combine cemented his status as a first-rounder.

49ERS

Max Iheanachor

OT ARIZONA STATE

28

Another year, another offseason in which offensive line tops the Texans' fix-it list. The athletic Fano could start at right tackle in Week 1.

TEXANS

Spencer Fano

OT UTAH

29

K.C. needs edge help. Parker didn't live up to expectations in 2025, but he's a ready-made run defender with a history of pass-rush productivity.

CHIEFS

T.J. Parker

EDGE CLEMSON

30

After trading Jaylen Waddle to Denver for this pick, Miami replaces him with Cooper, who has strong hands and great body control.

DOLPHINS

Omar Cooper Jr.

WR INDIANA

31

Coach Mike Vrabel will forever prioritize pass rushers. Howell is undersized at 6'2½" and 253 pounds but plays with a high motor.

PATRIOTS

Cashius Howell

EDGE TEXAS A&M

32

Cornerback figures to be a priority for Seattle, which lost Riq Woolen. So the champs grab Hood, who is physical and scheme versatile.

SEAHAWKS

Colton Hood

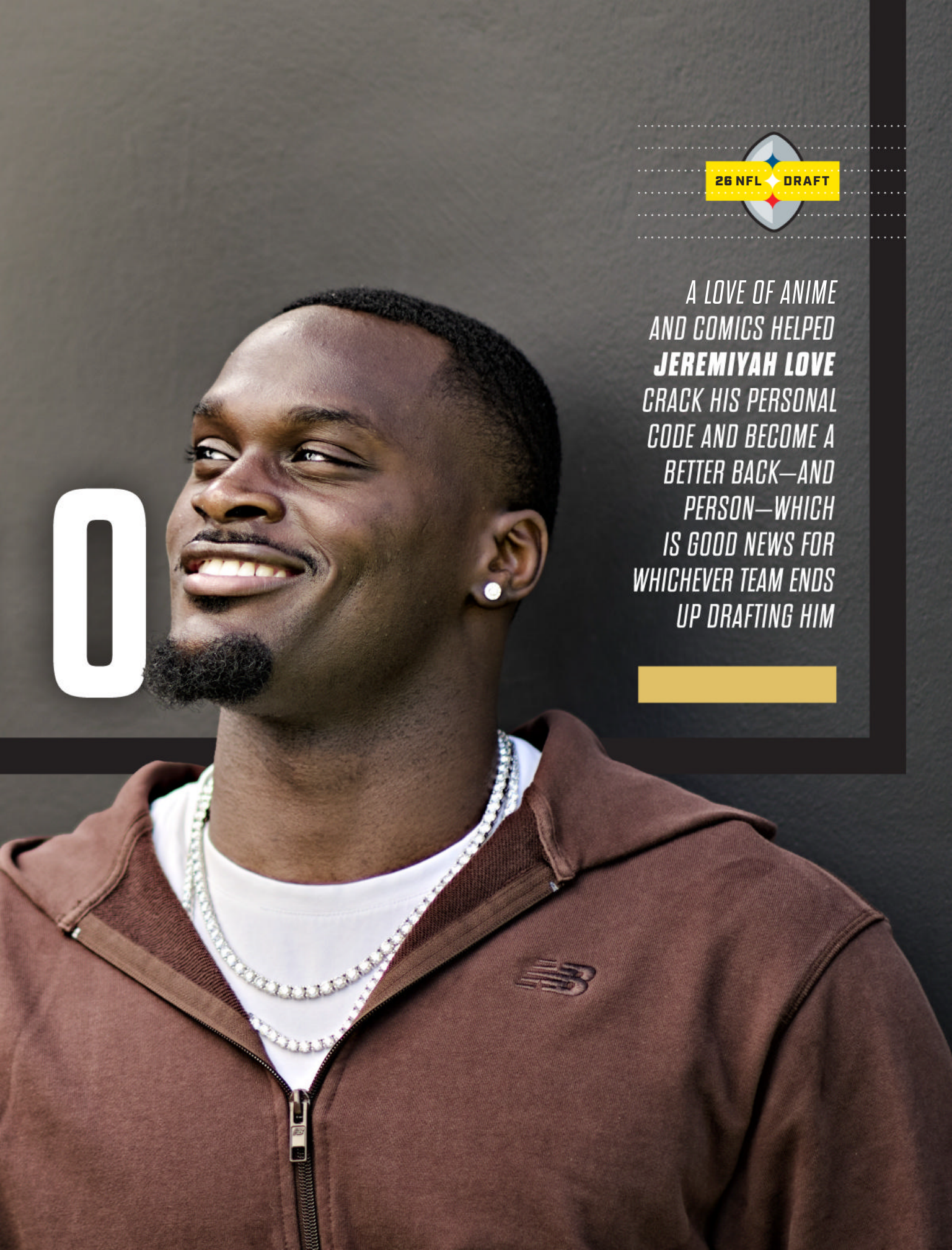
CB TENNESSEE

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: JOHN BYRUM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (2); AARON M. SPRECHER/GETTY IMAGES; NELSON CHENAULT/IMAGN IMAGES; BRUCE YEUNG/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT WINTERS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; TOM HAUCK/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; BRYAN LYNN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

BY CONOR ORR

THE NFL'S NEXT SUPERHER

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO



A LOVE OF ANIME AND COMICS HELPED **JEREMIYAH LOVE** CRACK HIS PERSONAL CODE AND BECOME A BETTER BACK—AND PERSON—WHICH IS GOOD NEWS FOR WHICHEVER TEAM ENDS UP DRAFTING HIM

Alone in his two-toned blue bedroom, where he spent most of his time, a young Jeremiyah Love had what he's now certain is a core memory.

He was watching *Seven Deadly Sins*, an anime series on Netflix. The protagonist is a quasi-immortal with spiky blond hair named Meliodas, who will be endlessly reincarnated but is doomed to have his emotions blunted every time he dies. After mercilessly killing one of his enemies, Meliodas becomes frightened by the prospect of turning back into his original, demonic form. But he needs to access that power to save the one he loves, and when he realizes that, tears pour from his eyes.

To that point in his life, Love had struggled with accessing his own emotions. Once, he told his mom that he didn't feel happiness, love, grief or sadness. Yet here was Meliodas, the most powerful being in the universe, crying. The warrior facade had come undone. Love then realized it was O.K. to express himself and let his emotions show.

"That kind of opened it up to me," Love says. "It was like, *Oh, I am who I am*. Before I watched anime, I was tired. I didn't have many emotions. I didn't really cry. I didn't really feel too much of anything. And, just seeing that opened my eyes to allow myself to be able to feel those things or to feel different types of emotions. From that time, it's allowed me to progress in my knowledge of how to express myself."

During an interview for a televised pregame segment last fall, Love's parents detailed his preference for solitude alongside some other perceived quirks. Their son grappled with common social situations. He took an eternity to get ready for school, insisting that his clothing fit in a specific way. All of his shoes had to be lined up in a certain order. (Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman says that when he went to the Love's home for his first visit, he was warned not to touch them.) A family pediatrician suggested that Love may have autism spectrum disorder. His parents did not feel the need to pursue accommodations for Jeremiyah, but they finally understood that he saw the world in a different way.

Now Love approaches the NFL draft, where he is a surefire top-10 pick after a junior season at Notre Dame that included 1,652 all-purpose yards and a third-place finish behind Fernando Mendoza for the Heisman Trophy. Certainly, football helped transform Love. But Love also transformed nearly everyone he came in contact with along the way, too. As impressive as his on-field exploits have been, his off-field heroics carry with them a weighty sense of morality and justice.

"He's such a unique individual," Freeman says. "He is so much more than a football player. There's so much that he does, and who he is when no one is around. He doesn't love attention. He doesn't do anything for attention. Certain guys thrive on acknowledgement and there's guys that, this is just who they are on the inside.

"That's who Jeremiyah is."

Love is not different for the sake of being different. For the sake of marketability. For the sake of presence. He is different like Clark Kent was, having been born of another world with unbelievable powers and trying to make the best of it here, in the place where he happened to land.

Whatever team drafts Love will acquire a back who can instantly alter a game with the potential to score from anywhere. Once, in high school while sitting out with a hamstring injury, Love sensed the momentum shifting, checked himself in for one play and ran 70 yards for a score before checking back out again. And, if you believe the coaches who have worked with him in college and high school, he's actually better at blocking than running and could be a legitimate NFL prospect as a wide receiver.

But it's Love himself who may end up providing the largest windfall for his next franchise. As he continues to explore personal growth, he feels he has taken his social and emotional evolution and applied it to his superpower: an unrelenting work ethic that, Love says plainly, "has got to be like that."

"I wanted to get to know myself more," Love says, downplaying, like a hero from the pages of one of his comic books, exactly what that means and just how much it took to get here.

CHRIS ARJODN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

MR. FANTASTIC
Love set the Notre Dame single-season record with 21 total TDs and had six 100-yard games in 2025.

THE CADETS of Christian Brothers College High ran an offense with two running backs on the field at the same time, positioned on either side of the quarterback. During the week, the coaching staff would explain to Love that certain plays were explicitly for him, necessitating that he would line up *here* and carry the ball *there*. The other calls belonged to Dylan Van or Ralph Dixon. Van has been Love's best friend for more than a decade and had a permanent place on the floor of Love's bedroom.

Despite this, quarterback Cole McKey would get the signal from the sideline (the Cadets didn't huddle) and look for Love on his left only to find him on the right.

In the frantic nanoseconds before the snap, McKey would look over and yell: "What are you doing?!"

Love would reply: "Just go with it."

Scott Pingel, the head coach at Christian Brothers, in St. Louis, notes that Love averaged just 10 carries per game during his final season despite being one of the top recruited backs in the country. He was switching spots not to get more carries, but because he wanted the ball to go to his best friend. (When he did carry to ball, he usually scored, including all five touchdowns in an overtime thriller to win the state title as a senior.) Love felt Van needed more opportunities to establish himself as a top prospect and he was willing to take on a blocking role as a result, which is what the other running back had to do. Van, now a junior running back at Pittsburgh State (and poised for a breakout season, Love is quick to mention), says that when Love was being recruited by all of the sport's biggest programs, he would text some of them, like Dan Lanning from Oregon, and say: "Yeah, but have you seen my friend Dylan?" Before ultimately committing to the Irish, Love told Notre Dame coaches that he would give a verbal on the spot if they agreed to sign Van, too.

Van says that being Love's best friend is "not what you'd expect." A lot of their time hanging together consisted of

THE FLASH
Love's time of 4.36 seconds in the 40 was the second fastest among running backs in his class at the NFL combine.

> ***"Looking at superhero stories, at their morals, helped me to DECIPHER IN REAL LIFE, Is it right to do this? Is it wrong to do this? It shaped my moral code," says Love.***

KIRBY LEE/IMAGN IMAGES

Love watching anime and Van watching TikTok in another part of the room. Still, despite it not being expressed, the (sometimes) silent bond felt—and still feels—unbreakable.

"If Jeremiyah loves you and you're close to him, he's going to be there for you," Van says, recalling the time Love spent his entire 18th birthday driving Van around and comforting him after Van learned a girl he liked was out on a date with someone else. "I've never had a friend in my life I'm closer to than Jeremiyah. He's not going to judge you for anything."

Another example: Before his senior year on the day the Cadets got their jersey numbers, Love was incensed to find that some of his best friends did not get their favorite—and highly-coveted—single-digit numbers despite being upperclassmen. The jersey number order was determined by an algorithm of factors that included attendance in offseason activities, which sometimes gave preference to sophomores and juniors. Love, however, wouldn't rest until he had made his case and secured the numbers for those he felt deserved a chance to wear them. When that story is told by coaches and teammates, Van says, it often omits a key detail: Love's number had already gone to a freshman who had no idea that he was snagging No. 4 from one of the best players in the country. But Love was more concerned about the people around him.

It is in these moments that one keenly understands what Love means when he says, "Looking at superhero stories, looking at their morals and what they deemed right or wrong helped me to decipher in real life, *Is it right to do this? Is it wrong to do this?* And it kind of shaped my moral code." Why shouldn't his friends get carries, too? Why shouldn't the older kids get the better numbers? It's black and white. Good and evil. Stripped of any machinations.

"Jeremiyah and his warmth—it's so unforced," says his mother, L'Tyona.

Love's growth has been a process. His family, for example, began pulling him out of his room at every opportunity to encourage him to socialize, spoke to his coaches about Love's needs and eventually secured him an individual dorm room at Notre Dame. Watching their son develop was full of incredible chapters.

To some parents, these otherwise forgettable happenings may land below the line of highlight-worthy—typical right-of-passage box-checking. But the Loves knew that Jeremiyah was changing his world, just as he had changed the world around him. L'Tyona remembers wandering around Christian Brothers one day to pick him up after practice. When she reached the chapel, she heard beautiful music echoing throughout. After asking several of his friends and teammates where Jeremiyah was, it became clear that he was seated behind the piano. He'd learned how to play the instrument (around the same time he began picking up conversational Japanese) without his parents knowing.

Then, there was the time he agreed to take a date to prom, then attend another prom at a different school after that. The time he picked Notre Dame. The time he stopped calling from South Bend to say he wanted to come home (his parents had debated moving somewhere close to campus, but ultimately allowed him to progress at an arm's length). The time he staged his first end zone dance with his teammates and, eventually, developed his signature heart celebration.

This, from the same kid who once attended a mixer at the University of Missouri on a recruiting visit and spent the entire time on the opposite end of the pool than everyone else. Totally content. Not lonely. Just telling his mom, "I'm enjoying myself."

"Now, to see him really be brotherly with his teammates, to see him celebrate, we were so elated," she says. "The first time we saw those outward expressions of his emotion—we were like, *Is he doing a dance?*"

PERHAPS THE simplest way to get Love to do something is to tell him that he cannot.

Slow down his 94-yard touchdown run against Boston College and watch the moment when Love is between the 40-yard lines. Love is staring at Notre Dame's sideline with the intensity of a model car builder gluing a rat's nest onto a Corvette.

The initial thought was that Love may have been taunting someone, though it was just a blur of his own teammates and coaches. The truth, says his Notre Dame running backs coach, Ja'Juan Seider, is that during a television timeout just before that play, he had leaned over and said to Love: "I bet you won't go 94."

Then, Seider explained to Love methodically in the huddle that the Irish were going to come out in a two-by-two formation (one receiver and tight end on either side), short motion the wide receiver to the left, crack block the safety and leave one cornerback whom Love would have to make a move on, which would only materialize if he were patient over the development of the play.

"It couldn't have gone any different than how I told the kid," Seider says, laughing.

Love cut back to the other side of the formation and burst through the heart of the Eagles' front seven like one of his favorite anime characters, Naruto, surging into battle. After he had cleared the last defender with only open space ahead, he started searching for Seider himself.

"He was talking s---," Love says, laughing. "I was looking for him."

The corollary here is that, while no one told Love he couldn't overcome his very human default setting, he became aware of the challenge: to be himself while simultaneously existing in the chest-thumping, fraternity-glorifying, pack mentality that is organized football. To this day, different interactions will yield further understanding, that perhaps someone was inferring something he hadn't picked up, or that he had unintentionally telegraphed a message he hadn't intended to.

Love arrived precisely on time for an interview in mid-March atop the complex of his temporary living space in

Jeremiyah Love talks about his best collegiate plays and why he's going to become the best rookie running back since Saquon Barkley. Scan the QR code above to watch an exclusive SI video.

KOHJIRO KINNO

Santa Ana, Calif., by himself, without a handler moving him around from place to place like a Ken doll (standard procedure these days for some top picks) or a cellphone to drown out his attention span. Love simply smiled and introduced himself, gliding through the gym onto a patio with sprawling views of the mountains.

Wearing a brown New Balance sweatsuit, a crisp white T-shirt, two diamond chains and sneakers with chrome accents, Love slipped seamlessly into a warm, honest conversation about Notre Dame, Freeman, life, anime and his two-yard touchdown run against Penn State in the 2025 College Football Playoff semifinal that featured five broken tackles. He counts that among his favorites.

Love says he likes doing media, so long as it's a subject he likes talking about.

He mentions his own comic book, *Jeremonstar*. The debut issue is the launching point of his sports anime comic universe. His father, Jason, narrates the story of Jeremiyah through his eyes. Nearly all of Freeman's seven children received an autographed copy for Christmas.

When asked what his hopes were for the comic—what he wanted the audience to understand—Love didn't hesitate. His leaned in just slightly, explaining that he wants readers to know him as someone who loves video games and anime. He wants them to understand that something bigger is coming that they'll one day have to pour themselves into it. He wants them to appreciate the fact that, even in their own life, they won't always be the star.

But, he says, "At the same time, be authentically you. Be yourself." □

PRESEASON PERFE

by **TOM VERDUCCI**

DANIEL SHIREY/WBCI/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

LIGHTS OUT

Daniel Palencia closed out the final win over the U.S., giving Venezuela its first WBC title and capping a scintillating tournament.

The World Baseball Classic has come into its own as a **SHOWCASE FOR THE GLOBAL GAME**. This year's version showed why it works the way it is—and might have been a preview of which players are in for a big 2026

CTION

THE WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC has grown from a quirky, why-should-we-care event upon its launch in 2006 to a defining moment (Shohei Ohtani striking out Mike Trout to end the 2023 final) to a tentpole mega-event on the baseball calendar. Almost 11 million people watched Venezuela beat the United States, 3–2, in the final, more than double the viewers who watched the '23 final. It drew a bigger audience than 12 of the last 35 World Series games and 19 of the last 35 NBA Finals games, including six of seven last year.

It has become a powerful jump start to the baseball season, which means it needs just one small change: start it one week later as a true ramp-up to Opening Day. The WBC momentum was gone by March 25, eight days after Venezuela's victory, when the MLB season began with the Yankees playing the Giants. As in past years, the momentum got dulled by the drone of a week of meaningless spring training games.

To boost the WBC effect, start the tournament a week later so that the final is played on a Tuesday, with an exclusive regular-season Opening Night game on the Thursday of that week. Only two WBC teams play in the final and only two MLB teams play on Opening Night, so most players will have more than two days in between. The extra week will also give pitchers more time to build arm strength.

The worst thing you could do to the WBC is move it to another time of year. Play the quarterfinals, semis and final during an extended All-Star break, as some have suggested? That's as terrible an idea as bifurcating March Madness or stopping a movie three-quarters of the way through and finishing it four months later.

A tournament builds a rhythm and narratives. Why truncate them and send people away? Imagine roster problems four months later, such as injuries, players on the trade market and players in foreign leagues. If you think that will solve the pitching workload problem, think again. Would the Dodgers really allow Yoshinobu Yamamoto to pitch seven innings in July in a meaningless game when it comes to the pennant race? Teams look to the All-Star break to give pitchers rest, not more intense work.

It took six iterations, but the WBC has won buy-in from players and fans. Now you want to move it to mid-summer? No. Leave it in March. Just slide it one week to roll right into Opening Day.

STRONG STARTS

THE 10 WBC PLAYERS WHOSE STOCK INCREASED THE MOST

THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

1 MAIKEL GARCIA

Venezuela

He was a Gold Glove winner and an All-Star with a .351 OBP last year, so it wasn't a shock to see him play well. He led the WBC in hits, fielded splendidly and played his usual "cold-blooded" style, as Venezuela manager Omar López called it. But you get the sense that, at 26, Garcia is ready to make his five-year, $57.5 million deal look like a bargain. With Bobby Witt Jr. at shortstop, the Royals have two foundational pieces on the left side of the infield.

FROM TOP: MADDIE MAHOLTRA/BOSTON RED SOX/GETTY IMAGES; CARLEE CALFEE/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

2 PAUL SKENES
United States

How much higher could his stock go? He had his Ohtani moment by throttling the Dominican Republic. Just as Ohtani, who had never played in a pennant race game, stepped up to close the 2023 final, Skenes, yet to play a meaningful game for the Pirates, went 8 1/3 innings in which he allowed one run and walked one.

3 JUNIOR CAMINERO
Dominican Republic

The Rays slugger lives for big moments and has the huge bat to exploit them. As Albert Pujols said, once Caminero quiets his swing a little bit, he is going to become an even bigger monster.

4 ENMANUEL DE JESUS
Venezuela

I can't believe the Tigers did not allow a 29-year-old with his sixth organization, including two seasons in South Korea, pitch in the final. The journeyman looked like an elite MLB setup man with 11 strikeouts in 7 1/3 innings.

5 LUIS SEVERINO
Dominican Republic

He made a change in his delivery this year to stay over his back side longer and to tweak his arm slot. The result: better command and the best velocity seen from the Athletics righty, now 32, in years.

6 DANTE NORI
Italy

An on-base machine across three levels in the Phillies' system last year (.361), he raked in the WBC (.400/.435/.750). The 21-year-old trains with Kyle Schwarber, whom Nori's grandfather recruited to Indiana.

7 ONEIL CRUZ
Dominican Republic

He didn't play much but smashed two home runs and a double in five at-bats. The Pirates shortstop also was the only hitter to square up one of Mason Miller's 73 pitches: a groundout hit 99.7 mph. Cruz, 27, has a high ceiling. The intensity of the WBC and being around old pros like Pujols and Nelson Cruz could help sharpen his focus.

8 ROMAN ANTHONY
United States

His discipline at the plate is scary good for a 21-year-old. Nothing changed about the Red Sox outfielder's approach in the big games in the WBC.

9 AARON NOLA
Italy

This was a good stress test for Nola going into his age 33 season with the Phillies after an injury-plagued 2025 campaign in which he had a 6.01 ERA. Was he declining? Not by evidence in the WBC, where he gave up one run in nine innings with just two walks.

10 FERNANDO TATIS JR.
Dominican Republic

Like Aaron Judge, he happened to play his worst in his team's elimination game. Otherwise, Tatis showed all-world plate discipline in one locked-in at-bat after another. Last year with the Padres, he lowered his chase rate for a second straight season, moving from the 26th percentile in 2023 to 73rd in '25. If he keeps that up, he could challenge for MVP. □

MICHAEL NAGLE/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

TANKS FOR NOTHIN'

Teams racing to the bottom are not making life easier for NBA commissioner **ADAM SILVER**, who suddenly finds himself facing several dicey issues

by Chris Mannix

KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES

GAHHH!

Ballmer's alleged salary cap circumvention and a spate of injuries to stars like Haliburton (opposite) late in an arduous season are among the key issues the league has to deal with.

IN

FEBRUARY, Adam Silver made his way to a podium inside the Intuit Dome, sporting a jet-black suit and a stoic look. Generally, the NBA commissioner's All-Star weekend press conferences are largely anticlimactic. A few factoids about the league's growth, updates on big-picture ventures, a midseason reminder that the NBA, if you didn't know, is a truly global league. Silver then usually bats around a few benign topics—expansion, broadcast rights agreements and the latest with NBA Europe are old chestnuts—before ducking out to enjoy the rest of the festivities. Yet as Silver walked across the room, he likely knew this session would go a little different.

The commissioner is in crisis, or at least these days he is *facing* crises, more than any Silver has confronted during his dozen years running the NBA. There's the cap circumvention scandal that has put him at odds with one of the NBA's most popular owners (Steve Ballmer), who also happens to be one of the world's richest men. There's the tanking epidemic, a problem significant enough for the NBA to slap two teams (the Jazz and the Pacers) with six-figure fines *before* the All-Star break for sitting healthy players. There's a federal investigation into illegal sports gambling that has ensnared a current coach and a player (Portland's Chauncey Billups and Miami's Terry Rozier, both of whom have pleaded not guilty). There's the rise in injuries, apathy toward the in-season tournament, accusations that a team owner's business is producing critical hardware that has been used by the Russian military…you get the idea.

Silver has navigated turbulent waters before. In 2014, after tapes surfaced of then Clippers owner Donald Sterling making racist comments, Silver, less than three months into his tenure as commissioner, banned Sterling for life. In 2020, the NBA was the first major sports league to shut down operations during the COVID-19 pandemic…and the first Big Four league to find a way back, re-opening in the Florida bubble in July. He has negotiated two labor agreements, dealt swiftly with threats to game integrity and signed the most lucrative broadcast agreement in NBA history. Says one longtime team executive, "Adam is one of the best commissioners in history. Not basketball history. *Sports* history."

The next few months could test that opinion. Silver must find tweaks for a draft lottery system that has failed to discourage tanking. He must adjudicate a Clippers investigation that has rivals screaming for blood. And he must find a solution to injury issues that have plagued the regular season. It is, says one high-ranking team executive, "an opportunity." While the ink is still wet on the 11-year, $77 billion broadcast rights deal that kicked in this season, it's never too early to think about the next one. "Getting this stuff right is his legacy," says the exec. Adds another, "This summer Adam is going to be very busy."

IN MARCH, Warriors coach Steve Kerr reiterated a long-standing position: The NBA's schedule is too long. "I know this will not be a popular opinion in the league office," Kerr said. "But I will continue to say it because it's obvious. We need to play fewer games." Other coaches echoed Kerr's assessment. "The season is so demanding," says Bulls coach Billy Donovan. "You have got to build up this callous to be able to endure 82 games [with] very limited practice time."

While the NBA might deny that there *is* an injury problem—according to data provided by the NBA in March, the league was tracking to have fewer injuries to starter-level players than last season and less games lost to "stars" in any of the last four years—there is no disputing that concern over soft tissue injuries is on the rise.

During the 2025 playoffs, three All-Stars—Jayson Tatum, Tyrese Haliburton and Damian Lillard—ruptured their Achilles tendons. This season calf strains have led to extended layoffs for Victor Wembanyama, Giannis Antetokounmpo and Anthony Davis.

The speed of the game, which has increased in recent years, has reached a breakneck pace. Ten years ago, two teams averaged more than 100 possessions per game. At the All-Star break this season, there were 18. By March, players had combined to cover 37.1 miles

> "Getting this stuff right" will determine **SILVER'S LEGACY**, says one league exec. Adds another, "This summer Adam is going to be very busy."

JUSTIN FORD/GETTY IMAGES

per game at an average speed of 4.29 mph, the longest average distance and fastest average speed since player tracking began in the 2013–14 season. Kerr, among others, believes slicing 10 games off the schedule will make a significant difference. "What I know about the league and coaching and how hard it is to play with the pace and the space," he said. "It would be a more competitive and healthier league if we played fewer games."

Privately, NBA officials won't argue against the merits of a shorter season. They will note—quickly—how much money would have to be forfeited to allow for it. Fewer games played means less revenue—roughly 20% by some estimates. The broadcast deals would need to be adjusted. All of it would have to be collectively bargained (the players and the league have a mutual opt-out in 2028). There is a long-term gain in shortening the season: Fewer games, theoretically, would make for a better product, making the league more valuable—if everyone is willing to absorb some short-term pain along the way.

That matters, given how teams are treating the regular season. In February, in front of a packed room at MIT's annual Sloan Sports Analytics Conference, Silver vowed to act decisively to curb tanking. "We are going to make substantial changes for next year," said Silver. "I'm not ruling anything out." Despite years of efforts to disincentivize the practice—which included flattening the lottery odds for the bottom three teams and creating the play-in tournament—the race to the bottom was more crowded than ever this season, with nearly a third of NBA teams exiting the All-Star break with no interest in winning. Said Silver, "We have to address it."

How is the question. Silver, by his own admission, is "an incrementalist," so forget grand ideas like eliminating the draft. Internally, league officials have discussed more modest solutions, like eliminating draft-pick protections (which would prevent situations like Utah and Indiana, two teams that nose-dived this season to hang on to picks) and banning teams from drafting in the top four for two years in a row.

Some think the league can go further. Flattening the lottery odds was a good idea … until teams with small odds started winning it. Last spring, Dallas, with a 1.8% chance to land the top overall pick, saw its Ping-Pong ball combination come up. San Antonio, with a 26.3% chance of finishing in the top four, grabbed the second pick. Instead of chasing play-in spots, teams have grown increasingly comfortable rolling the dice from the back of the lottery pack, leading to calls to eliminate the lottery altogether. "We have to make sure the worst teams are getting the best players," says a league official with Silver's ear. "You are never going to stop a small number of teams from tanking. The best you can do is make sure those teams have a pathway to get better."

Getting organizations to play by the rules is the most pressing issue. Accusations that the Clippers used a team sponsor to circumvent the salary cap with Kawhi Leonard landed in the league office like a grenade. Cap circumvention is a "cardinal sin" says a team executive, citing the efforts the NBA has made in Silver's tenure to level the playing field. Months

BURNING QUESTIONS

WILL JAMES HARDEN FIND PLAYOFF SUCCESS?

Harden's regular-season stats outshine his playoff numbers. Still, the Cavaliers, facing an offseason of uncertainty with Donovan Mitchell, rolled the dice on a deal for Harden, hoping he can co-pilot the Cavs through a weak East field. The stakes are high: With Mitchell eligible for a contract extension this summer, the future of the franchise could depend on how far Cleveland advances.

CAN JAYSON TATUM TAKE BOSTON TO ANOTHER TITLE?

What should have been a gap year thanks to Tatum's Achilles injury turned into this season's most improbable success story. Tatum has looked sharp since his faster-than-expected return to the Celtics' lineup. The key will be restoring his chemistry with Jaylen Brown, who assumed a larger role in Tatum's absence and has noted the growing pains getting reacclimated to playing alongside his longtime teammate.

FROM LEFT: LAUREN LEIGH BACHO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

NOT SMOOTH, JAZZ

Utah's dismal play earned the team a $500,000 fine for sitting healthy players during its third straight 50-loss season.

of follow-up reporting from investigative journalist Pablo Torre (nine YouTube episodes and counting) have dashed any hope that the story would go away, laying bare a pile of emails, bank records and testimony for all to see.

In 2014, Ballmer helped Silver end one scandal when he bought the Clippers from Sterling. Now, Silver is faced with having to punish Ballmer to end another.

It's not all dark clouds. Financially, the league is healthier than it's ever been. After years of flirting with European expansion, the NBA is poised to establish a league that will give it a firm foothold in the Eastern Hemisphere. Silver is pressing ahead with plans to add two new teams—Las Vegas and Seattle are the front-runners—that are expected to generate expansion fees in the neighborhood of $10 billion apiece. The NBA is strong, league and team officials will argue. Addressing these big issues will make it stronger.

Silver has already resolved one. At February's press conference, Silver recalled a recent conversation with Bob Cousy. The Hall of Fame guard—97 and still kicking—marveled at how global the NBA has become. In the 1950–51 season, Cousy's first, the league had two international players. Today, the number is 135. It's among the reasons Silver believed a new All-Star format—dubbed USA vs. the World—could work. The result was the most competitive game in years. So, check that one off what is becoming a very long list. □

Early in the season OKC looked like a lock to become the first team in seven years to repeat as champs. Then some intriguing storylines started to surface...

CAN LeBRON JAMES THRIVE AS A ROLE PLAYER?

Looking for reasons behind the Lakers' late-season surge? Start with James, whose willingness to downshift into a reduced role has unlocked L.A.'s offense. The Lakers' tear coincided with one of the lowest volume shooting months of James's career. L.A. can still turn to the King in crunch time, but the formula of less LeBron and more Luka Dončić (and Austin Reaves and Deandre Ayton), offers the best chance for playoff success.

WILL EXPERIENCE MATTER IN SAN ANTONIO?

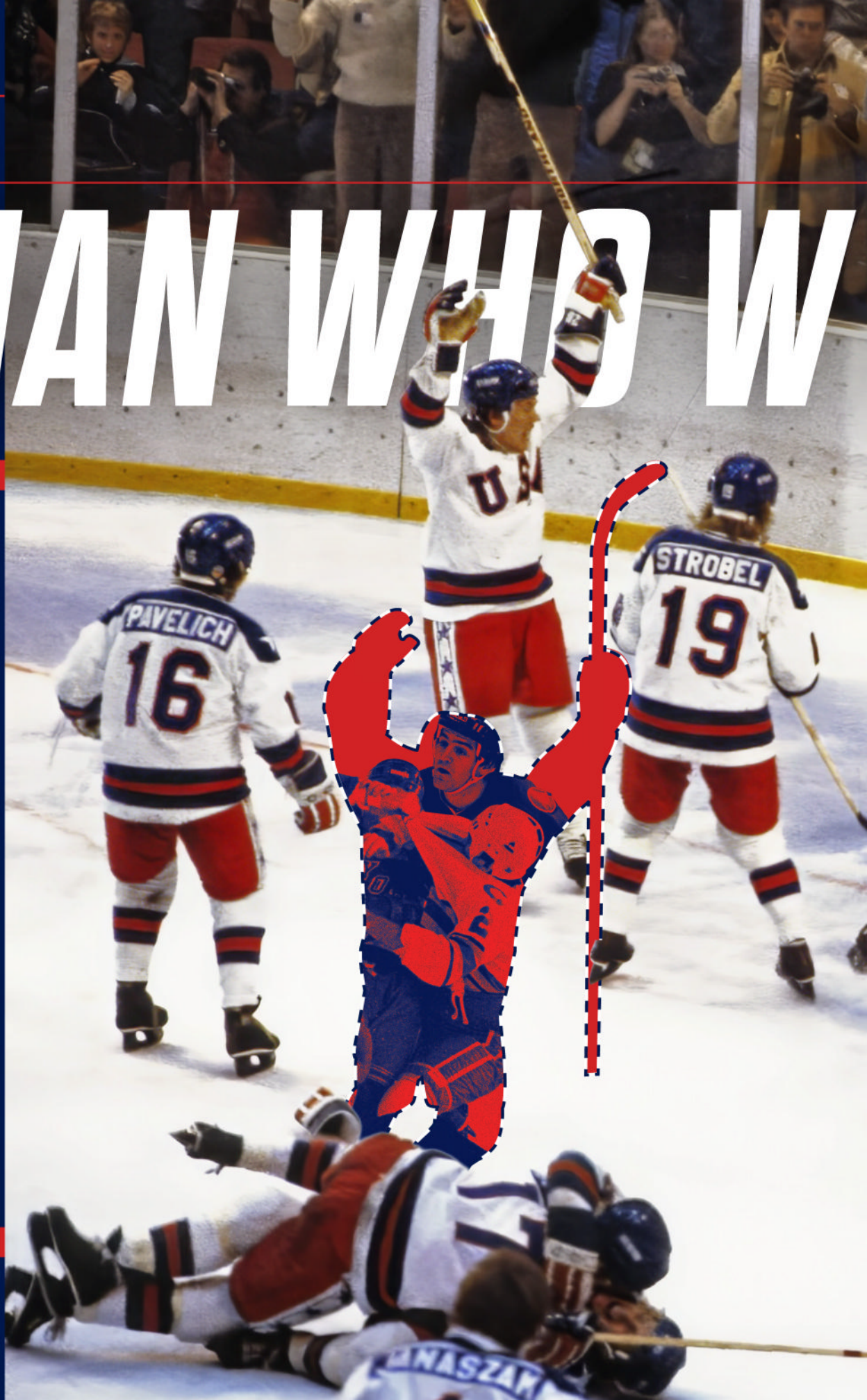
There is no denying the Spurs' talent: De'Aaron Fox, Stephon Castle and Dylan Harper are dynamic while Victor Wembanyama is arguably the best player in the world. But they are light on experience: San Antonio's rotation has 121 games of playoff experience with Harrison Barnes accounting for 71 of them. Historically, championships are earned through playoff failure. Can the Spurs buck that trend? With Wemby, anything is possible.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SOOBUM IM/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX SLITZ/GETTY IMAGES; EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

THE MAN WHO W

★ ★ ★

Just before the Miracle on Ice, **JACK HUGHES** was the last cut of the U.S. Olympic team. Forty-six years later, a player with the same name scored the gold-winning goal



by **BILL SCHEFT**

photograph by **HEINZ KLUETMEIER**

STEVE BABINEAU/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES; DAVE BURESH/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES

ASN'T THERE

LONELY STAR ★

Hughes was in the minors in Texas when the U.S.—coached by one of the final men replaced on the 1960 team—stunned the Soviets.

February, when Jack Hughes found the space under Team Canada goalie Jordan Binnington's left pad, a space slightly bigger than the one made earlier on his front teeth, snatching the first U.S. Olympic men's hockey gold medal in 46 years, it triggered euphoria, relief, redemption and whatever else you got.

For me, it was just triggering. *Why did the hero have to be named Jack Hughes?*

Hughes is the 90th most popular surname in the United States, and the *Jack* in front of it consistently lands in the top 30, and parents still wake predawn to take their kids to the rink. But come on. Jack Hughes? *The same name as the last player cut from the 1980 Miracle on Ice team?*

There's irony, there's karma, and then there's rubbing it in.

Five nights after the victory over Canada, I'm up watching *Miracle*, the 2004 much-more-good-than-flawed Disneyfication of the 1980 team. Twenty-nine minutes in, Patti Brooks (Patricia Clarkson) has this exchange with her husband, U.S. coach Herb Brooks (Kurt Russell):

Patti: "I know what this is about. I know it and you know it."

Herb: "What? Know what?"

Patti: "This. What you're doing. Chasing after something that you didn't get. That you may never get. What if it doesn't work out, Herb, huh? Are we gonna do this every four years?"

I had a prime seat for what happened with the original Jack Hughes: the press box. I covered him for three years at Harvard, where he was a Geryon-like, three-bodied defenseman (block, bang, finish), and I followed the Olympic team in the last three months of 1979 for the *Albany Times-Union*, where I wound up after I left Cambridge. If you've been to Albany, you know it's not some of God's best work. But it was the only job offer I got in May 1979, and I knew the Winter Games were only nine months and 140 miles away in Lake Placid.

FROM TOP: GEOFF BURKE/IMAGN IMAGES; STEVE BABINEAU/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES

★ ★ ★ ★

JACK HUGHES

By Christmas, I was in Placid for a pre-Olympic hockey tournament, where I interviewed Herb Brooks for the first and last time. I asked a couple questions. It, uh, did not go well.

Me: "Is there anyone you wish was here?"

Brooks: "Like who?"

Me: "[Boston College goaltender] Paul Skidmore."

Brooks: "I got my goalie. Next."

Me: "What about [All-American and future Hockey Hall of Famer] Joe Mullen?"

Brooks: "Joey Mullen made a decision to take care of his f---ing family." (Mullen's father was ill and his family's Hell's Kitchen apartment had collapsed, forcing him to turn pro and grab a $30,000 signing bonus from the Blues. Noted.)

Me: "You have to cut two more players."

Brooks: "Right."

Me: "How tough is that?"

Brooks: "Well, you're talking to the guy who was the last player cut from the 1960 team, so you tell me…"

This. What you're doing. Chasing after something that you didn't get. That you may never get.

HERB BROOKS was cut two weeks before the opening ceremony in Squaw Valley, Calif. Coach Jack Riley added three players at the deadline. All were silver medalists from the 1956 Games in Cortina: John Mayasich, formerly of the University of Minnesota, and the Cleary brothers, Bill and Bob, two years out of Harvard. Post-Miracle, younger brother Bob often told the story of pulling on his hockey pants before the first game in 1960 and seeing BROOKS inked into the lining.

"Jack Riley was calling me all the time to come out and join," recalls Billy Cleary, now 91 and sharper than you or I ever were, and who would win an NCAA championship during his 20-year coaching career at Harvard. "I said I can't afford it. He brought in me, Bobby and John. It caused some problems. They had been playing in Denver against Denver University the night before, lost, and had another game there the following night. We showed up. No one said a word. I thought, *Well, this is gonna be fun*. We went out for warmups and the three of us didn't get a puck. But we wound up tying Denver."

The 1960 team upset the Soviets (after Khrushchev ordered them to "bury the U.S.") and the Czechs in the gold-clinching finale. The Clearys and Mayasich combined for 19 goals in seven games, all wins. Back

★ ★ ★

THE TWO JACKS

The younger Hughes is a Devils All-Star, while the elder played parts of two NHL seasons with the Rockies.

home in Saint Paul, the 22-year-old Brooks watched the 9–4 win over the Czechs with his father. "Well," his dad said, "looks like they cut the right guy. ..." (Brooks wasn't just cut from the team, he was retouched. In a post-Games photo of the 1960 squad distributed by USA Hockey, he's in the back row, except that his head had been lopped off and replaced by Mayasich's.)

The U.S. won the 1980 pre-Olympic tourney easily, dispatching JV teams from the Soviet Union and Sweden, and were presented with gold medals that seemed more like upgraded participation trophies. I was aware of how precarious Hughes's spot was, especially after Brooks moved Dave Christian, a lock to make the team, back to defense. I thought Jackie was more versatile and a step faster than the lumbering Bob Suter from Wisconsin. And I was confident Brooks wouldn't be so uber-provincial that he'd carry nine of his former players from the University of Minnesota, and only four players from back East, all out of Boston University. But I was 22 and you couldn't tell me anything. I'd seen Jackie Hughes dominate the ECAC for three seasons, and I'd seen him at an Eliot House party one night, doing a beer-soaked version of "Mother's Little Helper" with two other guys years before karaoke was in the lexicon, or the appliance store.

Doctor, please, some more of these
Outside the door, she took four more

SO, YOU TELL ME.

"You're wrong about Suter," says John Powers, Pulitzer Prize-winning sportswriter and author of One Goal, the definitive and relentlessly vivid book about the 1980 team. "When Suter was healthy, he was a better skater than Jackie, more speed. Much better at puck movement, which was Herb's whole Soviet-style game. Also, he was the kind of tough guy Herbie loved. Suter broke his ankle in late November and he thought he was done. That's why he looked slow. But Herbie took him aside and said, 'Take care of the ankle. You won't lose any ground.' Which he didn't say to anyone. He wanted to keep them all on edge. The Wisconsin guys [Suter and leading scorer Mark Johnson] were always afraid they were gonna get cut because Herbie hated their coach [and Mark's father], 'Badger Bob' Johnson. He hated the way his wife would show up at games in a red jumpsuit clanging a cowbell. Herb would say, 'If Patti Brooks did that, I'd kick her ass all the way back to Shoreview.'"

WHAT IF IT *doesn't work out, Herb, huh? Are we gonna do this every four years?*

If Brooks had kept Hughes any more on edge, he would have had to use his stick like a Felipe Petit balancing pole. Powers had been writing about Hughes since he was a one-man gang at Malden Catholic, five miles north of Boston. "Herbie really got into his head," Powers remembers, "Jackie told me he'd lie in bed at night and hear Herbie muttering 'Hughes... Hughes...' every time he would lug the puck out rather than pass it. Another time, he took me aside and said, 'You know me. You've seen me play. I can play.'"

I left Placid just after Christmas, confident Jack Hughes and I would see each other in six weeks. But two things happened. At the end of January, I was told I would not be going to the Olympics. It was a plum gig for the closest midsize metropolitan daily, and the *Times-Union* decided to send two other guys, both older, both not me, one I had a problem with. Which was all you needed to know about me then.

Not long after—less than two weeks before the Games began—Jack Hughes was let go. Don't believe *Miracle*, which claims that Ralph Cox from the University of New Hampshire was the last player cut. No. Herb called Jackie's room, got no answer, then called Cox's apartment, which he shared with Mike Eruzione. Cox was not surprised. (As Brooks often said about him, "Ralph's got one problem. He just scores goals.") Herb then called back and asked Eruzione, who answered, if he'd seen Jack.

"He's right here."

"Hand him the phone."

Three days before the Olympics, the U.S. was routed by the legit Soviet team, 10–3, at Madison Square Garden. During the game, Jack O'Callahan, a gifted backliner with an infectious core, got his occasionally cranky knee caved in by a cheap shot. At first, doctors said he would need surgery and be out eight weeks. Herb was about to phone Hughes in Fort Worth, where he was playing for the Colorado Rockies' CHL team, and tell him to get on a plane. The kind of phone you want to be handed. Instead, Brooks sought a second opinion, and was told O'C might miss three games. There was no call to Fort Worth. O'Callahan only missed the first game against Sweden, which the U.S. tied in the closing seconds after two and a half periods of play that Powers's book described as looking "flatter than a 14th century globe."

"Herbie wanted the uncommon man," Powers says. "He loved O'Callahan, especially after he volunteered to be his whipping boy." The deal had been made early in the Team USA's barnstorming tour. "When I call you Jack," Brooks tipped, "I'm yelling at you. When I call you O'C, I want them to see me yelling at you."

Street-savvy and scary bright, O'Callahan had turned down a virtual full ride at Harvard for the actual full one on Commonwealth Ave., which Brooks adored. "O'Callahan's smarter than you are," Brooks said to Hughes at one point, "You were both admitted to Harvard, and he decided not to go."

O'Callahan was also a townie's townie. Another guy I had covered for four years. I wanted to interview him in Troy, N.Y., after the U.S. beat RPI in November, but was told he had gone home early to get his cranky

FULL CIRCLE ★ ★ ★

Bill Cleary (opposite, 7) was one of the last-minute replacements for a trio that included future coach Brooks.

★ *Before the Soviet game, Cleary told Brooks's squad, "You have captivated everyone. And there's* **20 GUYS** *rooting harder for you than anyone. And that's the 20 guys from the Squaw Valley team."*

FROM LEFT: JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN; HEINZ KLUETMEIER

knee checked out. I waited till just after 7 p.m. and called the Dugout Cafe, the dive-iest of BU dive bars.

"Dugout."

"Jack O'Callahan there?"

"Hang on."

"Hello?"

"O'C, this is Billy Scheft. We've known each other a while."

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm in Albany following your team, and I was told you'd gone home, so I figured I find you here."

"Well, aren't you a hot s---?"

Yes. Yes, I was. Just ask me. After I learned that I wouldn't be returning to Lake Placid, I set out to:

"I did love it that the winning goal was scored by the guy who **LOST HIS TEETH**,*" says Swift. "[But] nothing reminds me of or compares to 1980."*

1) drink a good bit more; 2) turn myself into John the Hockey Baptist about how overlooked Team USA was; and 3) try not to be smug and bitchy when I was proven correct. I went two for three. I wrote two columns for the *Times-Union*. The first (U.S. HOCKEY TEAM NOT LIKE 'PICK-UP' SQUADS FROM THE PAST) ran two weeks before the Games and opened with the lede "Americans like two things—underdogs and underdogs who live in the United States," and concluded that anything less than a medal would be a disappointment. I also referred to lightly regarded Finland, which the U.S. wound up having to defeat Sunday morning after the Miracle game for the gold, thusly: "Here's your sleeper...."

The second column ("...AND WE DID IT THEIR WAY") came out two days after the Finland game. The point I was desperate to make was that the upset had nothing to do with America, that it was ultimately a tribute to the Soviets. We had co-opted their style of play, their commitment to conditioning and their belief that amateurs should play for pay. (The 1980 team was the first to give players a stipend, $7,200 for six months, twice what I was making at the *Times-Union*.) It was a point that certainly could have waited (see: *smug, bitchy*), but I got to squeeze in the phrase "jingo jangle of the morning," so there was an urgency. Yes, I did get some mail, most of which contained suggestions to the effect of "Maybe Comrade Scheft would be more comfortable covering sports in Minsk."

I saw the team when they reunited that summer for a parade down Main Street in Lake Placid and the four players from BU were now sporting Massachusetts vanity license plates with the Olympic rings and USA next to their uniform numbers (Jim Craig: 30, Eruzione: 21, O'Callahan: 17, Dave Silk: 8).

FROM TOP: TOM WILLIAMS/CQ-ROLL CALL, INC./GETTY IMAGES; UPI/BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

There would be more reunions in the ensuing 45 years. Ralph Cox and Jack Hughes were always invited. Don't know about Cox, but Jack never showed. And really, can you blame him? Jack Hughes moved on. For many years, he and his brother George (another talented Harvard iceman, the older half of a pair, who, in mid-disco era, I had nicknamed the "Hughes Corporation") were in business with O'Callahan: Beanpot Financial Services. Though originally based in Chicago, the outfit was named for the iconic local college hockey tournament, the Beanpot, held at the Boston Garden every February.

So yes, the original Jack Hughes moved on, which is more than you can say for me. Which dovetails back nicely to the subject of uniform numbers.

During the last three years of my 24 writing for David Letterman, the boss and I came up with a semi-regular segment, "Uniform Numbers with Bill Scheft." The format was what we used to call a "refillable." Me in a fake soundproof booth. Announcer Alan Kalter asking me obscure uniform numbers for a ridiculous amount of money. Me nailing it. Alan then correcting me on a wrong answer. Me correcting Alan. Alan asking nonexistent judges for confirmation. SFX: A bell. Alan reducing the money to nonsense and asking me to come back next week.

It was, like more than a few things, developed to tickle Dave, and it did that, along with me and almost no one else. We wound up doing five. The third featured Alan asking me for the numbers of the last four players cut from the 1980 team. Purposely, I did not give my answers in order. I just booth-barked, "Tim Harrer, No. 18; Jack Hughes, *who shouldn't have been cut*, No. 12; Ralphie Cox, No. 14; and … Les Auge, No. 2."

I thought about reaching out to Hughes, especially after his name was unwittingly resurrected, but come on. Not the phone you want handed to you. I did try to get a hold of the woman who had put us down this road: Ellen Hughes. The former UNH hockey standout and Team USA player—who served as a player development consultant for the 2026 U.S. Olympic women's team—had dubbed the second of her three NHL boys Jack. The roux of this karmic gumbo only thickened when I learned that Ellen Hughes was in fact Ellen Weinberg-Hughes, with whom I had worked on the 1998 ESPYs, where she was a first-line member of the production team and I was adding the wiseass to Norm Macdonald's now legendary monologue. (A monologue that ended with a line I still wish I could take credit for: *"Heisman Trophy winner Charles Woodson is here. Charles, that's something nobody can ever take away from you, unless you kill your wife and a waiter."*)

Ellen and I never connected. But really, what could she possibly have said? "Yeah, I heard that …"

★ PEANUT. GALLERY

★ *Jimmy Carter welcomed the Miracle on Ice squad to the White House, while the 2026 team—after visiting the President in the Oval Office and dining on burgers—were in the House chamber for the State of the Union.*
★

Cleary chuckles when I run the name irony over him. "I hadn't thought of it, in those terms." he says. "Jackie was a great kid, but that has to happen when you're putting a team together. I never talked to Jack after it happened. It was a fait accompli. You're certainly not gonna second-guess a coach."

One other thing. Herb Brooks had gotten the Olympic job only after it had been turned down. By Billy Cleary. Harvard coach Billy Cleary. Jack Hughes's coach Billy Cleary.

This. What you're doing. Chasing after something that you didn't get. That you may never get.

PATRICIA CLARKSON'S Disney dialogue compelled me to raise the unconscious. I suggested to Billy that maybe on some level, having been replaced on the 1960 team at the last minute by a Harvard guy, a Cleary brother no less, and getting the '80 U.S. Olympic coaching job only after the other Cleary brother had passed, Herb Brooks was, on some unprobed level, trying to avenge a wrong.

"Absolutely not," Billy says of Brooks, who died in 2003. "I was happy when Herbie got the job. I vouched for him. We were friendly. I knew him. I liked him. I coached against him. He was always a straightforward, principled guy."

And then Billy Cleary sweep-checked that notion away with one story.

"Lake Placid was the only time I had gone back to the Olympics since 1960. I went to the arena before the game with Russia. I saw the players coming off after warmups. Hell, I knew half of them because I recruited them. I saw Herbie. I said, 'I wish you well.' That's it. I start to walk out of the arena, and the trainer came after me and said, 'Herbie wants you to speak to the players.' I said, 'Me?'

"People asked me, 'What did I say?' I told them, 'I think I know what's going through your mind. You're up here in oblivion, in the middle of nowhere, and you think you're isolated and no one is paying attention. But I'm telling you, you have captivated everyone. And there's 20 guys rooting harder for you than anyone. And that's the 20 guys from the Squaw Valley team.'"

All this way, and nobody's sharing the trigger. Flailing, I reached out to Ed Swift, this very magazine's Virgil for the epic poem that was Placid. "I actually didn't put that together till later," he wrote in an email from New Zealand. "I did love it that the winning goal was scored by the guy who lost his teeth, highlighting how friggin' tough hockey players are compared to other sports. Absolutely nothing, nothing ever reminds me of or compares to 1980."

O.K., O.K. … Don't rub it in. □

BIGGER THAN THE LITTLEST

For six years, **AMALIA HOLGUIN** has grappled with the grief from a helicopter crash that robbed her of, among others, three AAU teammates and their coach, Kobe Bryant. Now, as the last member of that heralded squad to finish her high school career, the Texas-bound guard is ready to display what she learned from the NBA legend on a bigger stage

MAMBA

by **EMMA BACCELLIERI**

photograph by **TAYLOR BALLANTYNE**

AMALIA HOLGUIN has a day off from school and the entire world in front of her.

Her high school basketball team has a bye for the next round of the state playoffs. After that, right as the season ends, Amalia will turn 18, and her birthday will line up with spring break. She's thinking about how to celebrate—something low-key, maybe, just family and close friends. The senior knows it may be her last birthday at home with her parents, James and Flora, and her sister, Elisa. And then will come prom, and graduation, and then all her dreams. She will spend the summer playing hoops in Greece, where her family has roots and where she will train with the national team, and then she will leave to play at the University of Texas.

But now, it's March, and there is no school, leaving Amalia with her license and her car and the freedom that any 17-year-old would love on a stereotypically gorgeous day in Southern California.

She does have basketball practice, of course, two hours of grinding with her Sage Hill School team. But she will start hours earlier by getting up shots in the gym with one of her old coaches, and she will finish hours later with strength training and weightlifting and then another block of private skills coaching.

There are other players carrying similarly intense schedules in the demanding world of modern elite youth hoops. There are none carrying quite the same weight as the one they call the Littlest Mamba.

The plucky guard was the youngest AAU teammate of Gianna Bryant and, by extension, the last high schooler coached by Kobe Bryant. She lost a combination of beloved coaches, teammates and their parents when a helicopter crashed into a Calabasas hillside six years ago and killed Kobe and Gigi; Christina Mauser; Payton and Sarah Chester; and Alyssa, John and Keri Altobelli, along with the pilot, Ara Zobayan.

Amalia was not yet 12.

The other members of that roster, the older girls on Team Mamba, have all graduated and gone off to college. The last one remaining is Amalia. That has left her figuring out what it means to be the last of the Little Mambas, and what it will mean for her to be more than that.

WHEN AMALIA and Elisa were in elementary school, their parents decided they were ready for a dog, and they did what so many other basketball fans in the area had done before them in Southern California. They named their new dog Kobe.

Bryant was the focal point of their Lakers fandom, a symbol more than a person, impossibly larger than life. They watched his last game together in their living room. Amalia nestled into the corner of the couch nearest to the television and burst into tears when the buzzer sounded. She had just turned 8.

Amalia knew already that she loved basketball. She also knew that she was pretty good. Good enough to stand out in her local youth program. Good enough to play with older kids and hang with the boys. Good enough that Flora would soon talk with her about choosing between soccer and hoops. Amalia knew already the answer was basketball.

Then came a weekend tournament where Amalia's team played in the same gym as Gianna Bryant's. (Kobe had gotten involved with the roster following his retirement but was not yet its namesake and mastermind. This team was called the Riptide.) Flora and James watched a typically strong game from Amalia, scoring at will, controlling the action. So did Kobe Bryant.

"Is number 10 your daughter? She's really special."

James can repeat this easily, a story told a thousand

COURTESY OF HOLGUIN FAMILY

MARCH MADNESS

Amalia, who scored 61 points in her regular-season finale, led Sage Hill to a 28–6 mark and an upset of Sierra Canyon (above) in state playoffs.

KOHJIRO KINNO

times, a moment that became a great dividing line in their lives. As it was happening, though, he could barely understand it.

"Listen," he said apologetically, his first words to Kobe Bryant, "I didn't hear anything you just said."

Gigi Bryant and her teammates were 12. Amalia was 10. Nearly all of the other girls had been on the same local All-Star team. Amalia had never met them. They all lived in or near the ritzy community of Newport Beach. Amalia lived an hour away in West Covina. But when Bryant saw Amalia, this curiously intense little kid with a sweet jump shot, he believed he saw the missing piece for the team that would soon be called the Mambas.

That left just one problem. Bryant had told the team they needed a big. The girl he brought to practice was smaller and younger than everyone on the roster. Flora recalls the reaction: *This is our big?* And she recalls, too, how Bryant laughed off the surprise. "We'll grow a big!" he said. (They did get a real big eventually: former NBA center Zach Randolph's daughter Mackenly.)

For the first two months or so, "I couldn't really grasp anything," she says. "I was just starstruck." But that feeling soon disappeared. She became the beloved little sister of the team. It was unlike anything she had experienced before: The expectations were higher, and the work so much harder, but the group was so much closer, too. Kobe became Coach Bryant. And this is where she struggles sometimes. It can feel like people ask the wrong questions.

They will ask, for instance, whether she really met Kobe Bryant. *What do you mean?*, she wants to say. Bryant was there for every practice and every game. "Twice a day," Amalia says of their weekend and summer sessions. "He wanted to go three times a day." His standards were high. "He didn't treat you like your typical 10-, 12-year-old," she says. But that was magical for a young player who only ever wanted to be seen as a serious baller and not as a little kid. Yet she was, of course, a little kid, and Bryant knew that, too.

At the end of one early training session, Amalia burst into tears. It was not that she was exhausted so much as simply "homesick," she remembers, even though she was only an hour away from her neighborhood and her mother was right outside the gym. She felt like she had pushed herself further than she had ever been from home.

Bryant scooped her up. He carried her off and talked until he got her giggling. No more practice this weekend. "He had a great brake pedal," says Brenan Ghassemieh, who became Bryant's personal trainer after he retired from the NBA and then worked extensively with the Mambas. (That began after the umpteenth time Bryant asked how to adapt a workout for 12-year-old girls.) "I do think a lot of people on the outside looking in would say, 'Oh, that was overkill, too much practice.' But I think as a coach and a parent, he knew what to do."

This is another question that feels wrong. People will sometimes ask Amalia about the hypercompetitive Black Mamba. But he was her coach, the father of her beloved teammate, someone who pushed hard yet always knew when to schedule a rest day. He did not yell during games. ("He knew if he stood up or felt too animated, it might intimidate the girls," Ghassemieh says. "He kind of went a little Phil Jackson.") Bryant had them do strength training and countless drills but did not use running as punishment—except for one fatherly point of concern. When temperatures dipped into the 60s, every girl needed a sweatshirt, or she would run. No catching a cold on his watch.

Bryant took them to get manicures and pedicures. He rented out Dave & Buster's so the girls could have the run of the place. Birthdays and holidays were celebrated as a team. "He was such a private person," James says. "But these girls were such a big part of his life."

Amalia wondered early on if her family should rename their dog. "It's kind of awkward," she says. "Having your dog's name as your coach." But Kobe the Dog already knew his name, and besides, Kobe the Coach never had to know. Until one day at practice, Flora got a panicked call about the dog getting into something in the kitchen.

"Kobe ate what?" Flora gasped.

Bryant turned around, confused, and then laughed and laughed when they explained.

The roster was impossibly close. Bryant had wanted strengths and styles to complement one another on and off the court. Even the way the girls bickered felt special—"Like how me and my sister fight," Amalia says. They called themselves a sisterhood. No one could find a better word for it.

And here is another question that feels wrong. People ask Amalia about the Mambas as if they were any other team, a group that practiced and saw each other at games and then went home. No one seems to understand that it felt so much bigger. The girls spent nearly all of their time together. It started with their demanding training, of course, but that carried over into sleepovers and endless hangout sessions.

The result was an AAU experience that was completely ordinary in some ways and totally extraordinary in others. Bryant did not want a staff loaded with NBA icons. His lead assistant was Christina Mauser, a former gym teacher and local mom of three, whom the girls called the Mother of Defense. "He just wanted it to be

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF HOLGUIN FAMILY; KOHJIRO KINNO

down-to-earth and normal and never make us feel like we had to be under the spotlight," Amalia says. But, of course, when they walked into a gym, everyone knew.

Cameras would come out. Strangers asked for pictures, or worse, took photographs of the preteen girls without asking. Bryant had security for them at every game. They did not hang out with players from other teams—a back room was set up for them at tournaments to avoid people swarming Bryant. If a player needed extra water, a security guard would leave for a refill. This strange dynamic made their circle even closer.

But proximity to celebrity also came with perks. Their basketball education featured incredible guest speakers and trainers. Bryant ushered the girls into the Phoenix Mercury's locker room to meet Diana Taurasi and into the Las Vegas Aces' locker room to meet A'ja Wilson. They worked out with Tracy McGrady and Sabrina Ionescu. Bryant got a private dining room for a team meal with Devin Booker. When he decided they should watch an elite girl closer to their age, he brought in Azzi Fudd, then a top high school prospect and now a star at UConn. The Mambas were even on a March 2019 cover of *SLAM*. Bryant handled the interview—the girls posed for photos but did not talk to reporters.

Bryant ordered photo albums at the end of each of their first two seasons. They feature those superstar meetups, the courtside seats, the magazine cover. And there are, of course, game photos, too. But there is mostly everything that made the girls sisters: giggling in hotel rooms and splashing each other at pool parties and blowing out candles on cupcakes. Between the experiences that no AAU team in the world has ever had, there were the experiences that every close-knit, sisters-for-life preteen friend group has always had.

There is a third photo album, too. It begins like the earlier volumes—the girls playing and laughing and practicing. There is a holiday party from December 2019, girls and parents and coaches all squeezing into the frame with presents on the table next to them, Gigi and Alyssa and Payton wrapped in the arms of teammates. Then comes January 2020. The pages then show only funeral programs and memorial tributes and candlelight vigils.

NEAR-PERFECT 10

Amalia kept her number from the Mambas as she became a four-star recruit—and scored more than 2,000 points—at Sage Hill.

AFTER THE helicopter crash, the girls watched the basketball world mourn Kobe in terms of what he meant to the game, permanently memorialized in his jersey. It felt wholly unconnected from what they saw in their own hazy grief. They had lost Coach Bryant, who brought them all together, who joked about going to their weddings, and Coach Christina, who taught them defensive stances and showed up for them every day. They were mourning three precious, irreplaceable pieces of their sisterhood, Gigi and Alyssa and Payton, and their dear parents.

Team Mamba shuttered. But as the girls split across other top AAU programs in Southern California, they had their high school futures to consider, too. Their plan had always been to play together at Sage Hill. A private school near the Bryant home in Newport Beach—Gigi's older sister, Natalia, was a student there—it was better known for academics than athletics. Bryant had been intrigued by the possibility of the girls building up the program together.

Five of the eight girls stuck with that plan. In the fall of 2020, four would start as freshmen at Sage Hill, and two years later Amalia would follow, their little sister finally catching up. The fivesome carried the weight of their legacy together. Amalia loved her first two seasons at Sage Hill alongside her old friends Emily Eadie, Annabelle Spotts, Kat Righeimer and Zoie Lamkin, collectively boosting the school into a new division of competition. They understood each other implicitly, and they held each other through grief and joy alike. They were best friends, but they were something more, too.

And then, like any kid sibling, Amalia prepared for her surrogate older sisters to graduate and head off to college.

Well, after they leave, what's next? Amalia thought. *Like, I'm going to be left alone.*

All five Sage Hill Mamba girls had been training with NBA alum Darren Collison. Amalia kept working with him—focusing

As she prepares for her college career at Texas, Amalia Holguin breaks down the blueprint Kobe Bryant left her. Scan the QR code to watch an exclusive SI video.

NEXT STEPS
After her trip to Austin, Amalia canceled her other college visits, having found a place where she could "go be away from home and just grow as a person."

on ballhandling and playmaking. ("She wants this so bad," Collison says. "She's serious about her craft.") And her father thought it might also be useful to contact an old coach.

Brandon Holmes ran the youth program where Amalia had played in elementary school. He had known her when she was a shy, serious kid dribbling circles around older players. Amalia was now looking ahead to her junior year, her first season without the other Mambas, and James thought maybe she could benefit from working again with Holmes.

"The first thing I thought was, Are we going to be able to connect like the way that she connected with Kobe?" Holmes says. "Can I teach her something? Will she be receptive?" He made their first workout deliberately tough. Amalia did everything he asked, but she "didn't say two words the whole workout," Holmes remembers. Afterwards, he gave her a hug, but he figured that she might not come back. James called. She had loved it.

Over months of sessions, Holmes finally saw the goofy little sister that she had always been with those who knew her best. He saw how much her game had developed—her smooth handles, her impressive court vision, her deep shooting range—and how desperate she was to make herself even better. And he saw what it meant for Southern California to look at her and see only Kobe's Littlest Mamba.

"When I train her, I don't want anybody in the gym," Holmes says. "I don't want anybody with their cameras out. It's hard for her to navigate that—everybody knows that she played with Kobe."

Amalia never wanted to shy away from how much their relationship meant to her. Yet as Bryant grew increasingly mythologized, remembered as a legend rather than as a real person, Amalia was seen as a chance for outsiders to access that legend themselves, rather than as a real, grieving teenager. "If I have a bad game, it's all over the internet," Amalia says. "It's all over everything, like, *Last Mamba didn't have this game*." Everything she did was linked to him.

"People don't take that into consideration, being so young and dealing with something so tragic," Holmes says. "And people are constantly talking about it. It never, ever goes away."

Amalia had grown into a serious college prospect. A crafty, confident combo guard, who stood only 5'9" but played above her size, she would have her pick of major programs. And she had also grown into a new perspective on her old team.

TAYLOR BALLANTYNE

> She knows that even when basketball feels tied up in grief, it can help carry her through. "She had to **GROW UP** up a lot faster than everyone else," says her high school coach. "She's ready to show the world who she is."

She was just old enough to know how young she was at the moment when her world changed. "Nobody really has a set life at 10," she says. There was so much that she had not fully understood then. Bryant used to encourage them with his signature motivational quotes. Some of them had just washed over her. *Being great isn't easy—or everyone would do it.* "I was like, O.K., I don't really know what that means, but sure," she says. "But now, looking back on it…" During tough workouts, Amalia still hears Coach Bryant's voice in her head, and Coach Christina's, too.

Nor had she not realized how rare it was to have such a tight group. Even at 10, Amalia had known the Mambas were unlike most teams. But she had not yet understood just how difficult it would be to find more of that sisterhood in the years ahead. She felt, on some level, that she was always searching for something that she had already had.

"I need to find a place that felt like my past," she says of her recruiting framework, "and like what I had before."

James took her to UCLA and USC games when she was a kid. Very much a child of Southern California—she has still seen snow just once in her life—she thought she might want to play her college ball at home. But when it finally came time for recruiting, she says, "I feel like I needed to go be away from home and just grow as a person."

Her first official visit was to Texas—fresh off its run to the 2025 Final Four and positioning itself for another in '26. She liked the bonds that she saw on the roster between starters and bench players alike. She liked that Longhorns coach Vic Schaefer was never going to go easy on her—or, for that matter, on anyone—but she liked that he could joke around with everyone, too. She liked that his daughter was on the coaching staff and that he introduced her to his wife and son. This was it. She canceled her other visits.

The program liked what it saw in her, too. "What separates the kid is that she's just so competitive," says Schaefer.

People often look at that competitiveness and see Kobe. The Littlest Mamba. Yet that had always been Amalia. That was the kid playing two grades up, the kid who pushed at workouts until she cried. "That kind of fire has to burn for a long time," Ghassemieh says. "It has to be genuine. It wasn't Kobe giving her this fire of emotion and inspiration, and then this horrible accident happens, and now she's just dragging herself just to prove something. This is just who she was."

That has crystallized over these last two years, where she has been not just the Littlest Mamba but the Last Mamba, as she turned 16 and 17 and now 18. Amalia has always said that she plays for Gigi, Alyssa and Payton; for their parents; for Coach Bryant and Coach Christina. Her basketball experience has been framed by that loss. But she does not want to be completely frozen by it. Of everything that she has picked up over these last few years, her floater and her knowledge of how to move off the ball and her growth as a more vocal, persuasive leader, she is especially grateful for this: She knows that even when basketball feels impossibly tied up in grief, the game has the power to keep carrying you through, and it will eventually bring you somewhere else.

"She had to grow up a lot faster than everyone else," Sage Hill coach Jethro Julian says. "She's ready to just show the world who she is."

So on her day off from school, Amalia puts up a hundred shots in the gym on a quiet morning with Holmes, and she practices with Julian, and she lifts weights with Ghassemieh, and she runs some drills with Collison. And in a rare down moment, between all of this, Amalia sits in the bleachers at Sage Hill, where she is a little more than a week away from her final high school game.

This is where Coach Bryant had said they would all play, where they would go to class and learn to drive and get asked to prom and hopefully play for a state championship. Some of them never had the chance to start. Now there is only Amalia left to finish.

"Only eight girls have had the experience to tell this story in the whole entire world," Amalia says, curls piled on top of her head for her next workout, looking across the gym to where her name is on the wall. "And there's how many people in the world? Like, it could have been anyone. But it was me that got chosen."

Which is both correct and not quite. Bryant recognized her fire but did not start it. It could not have been anyone. Really, always, it had to be her. □

UNAMERICAN FOOTBALL

by **STEVE RUSHIN**

illustrations by **LARS LEETARU**

As he climbed the ranks at ESPN, **JOHN SKIPPER** made it his mission to make the beautiful game a popular one in the U.S. It wasn't easy, but it was interesting—and ultimately worthwhile

THE PARROT lived in a gilded cage inside the gilded cage of Trump Tower. From their twin perches 49 stories above Fifth Avenue, Chuck Blazer and his tropical bird surveyed Central Park and the world beyond it. Up there in the clouds, the white-bearded Blazer, a parrot summoned to his shoulder, "looked like Zeus," thought John Skipper. Vladimir Putin once told the 300-plus-pound Blazer he looked like Karl Marx. Either way, bearded and birded, Blazer cut an arresting figure.

Skipper had ascended to Blazer's lair because he needed the parrot—or rather its owner—to vanquish a peacock. The peacock was the mascot of the National Broadcasting Company, headquartered in the art deco landmark six blocks away at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. The chairman of NBC Sports, Dick Ebersol, was so long identified with that network that he'd come to resemble, in Skipper's mind, an actual peacock, looking down with feathers fanned on ESPN, the cable sports arriviste based in a former industrial park roughly 107 miles north of midtown Manhattan, in Bristol, Conn.

Skipper, in that October of 2005, was nominally Ebersol's counterpart, the newly anointed head of all content for ESPN. As a middle-aged convert to soccer, Skipper was visiting Trump Tower to enlist Blazer's help in beating NBC to the most popular event in all of sports, the FIFA World Cup, whose United States television rights were not yet sold for the 2010 and 2014 tournaments.

John Skipper

Toward that end, Blazer really was Zeus-like, the most powerful man in American soccer, one of 25 members of the FIFA executive committee. These were the people who helped decide who hosted World Cups and who got to televise them. Skipper was under the impression that Ebersol had a handshake deal with Sepp Blatter, the FIFA chief, to award U.S. rights to NBC. Skipper also suspected that FIFA was not filled with men of unwavering loyalty. "Dick Ebersol," as Skipper would later put it, "had a handshake that didn't mean s---."

SKIPPER BY then was so enamored of the world's game that he called the kind of football played by the Green Bay Packers and Alabama Crimson Tide—on every reference, with a hint of contempt—"American tackle football." As in: "I grew up in North Carolina playing American tackle football."

And he did, in Lexington, N.C., in the wide, rolling plateau of the Piedmont Triad, America's furniture-making capital, whose walnut, pine and poplar trees were turned into easy chairs and end tables for a nation newly in thrall to television. When Skipper was born in 1955, all that furniture coming out of North Carolina was suddenly arranged around another piece of furniture: the glowing hearth of a console TV.

On Feb. 9, 1964, 8-year-old John Skipper gazed into the bottle-green glass of his family's portable RCA Victor, its plastic cabinet colored a mid-century magenta, and watched four young men from Liverpool break America.

His father had his own louvered window on the world, the pigeonhole letter cabinet at the Lexington post office. There, Darrell Skipper, a mail carrier, earned extra money on Saturday mornings sorting mail from the great canvas sacks that washed up on the loading dock. The brand-new $500,000 post office at the corner of State and West opened the same week in November of 1967 that *Rolling Stone* published its first issue. All of life was in those U.S. Mail sacks—draft notices, love letters, birthday cards, the college acceptances that brought deliverance from Vietnam—but preteen John tagged along with his dad to read the magazines.

The Village Voice had a single subscriber in Lexington, bringing news from the distant planet of bohemian Manhattan. But John's favorites were *Rolling Stone* and especially SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, with its full-color accounts of faraway games of American tackle football. In the post office, the boy was held spellbound, careful to return the magazines to their pigeonholes uncreased, as if still unread. After studying English literature at the University of North Carolina, he moved to New York City, and a job at *Rolling Stone*.

There, he met the magazine's national affairs correspondent, Hunter S. Thompson. Together, Skipper says, they "broke a bunch of stuff" playing American tackle football in the halls at a staff party, among a group of "roughnecking guys who had too much to drink and too much ingestion of other stuff." Still, as he had in the Lexington post office, Skipper preferred sports to music; after nearly a decade, he left *Rolling Stone* and ultimately wound up at ESPN. He transformed a nascent website with a ridiculous name—ESPNET.SportsZone.com—into a juggernaut renamed ESPN.com. He also started *ESPN the Magazine*.

Skipper visited Trump Tower to enlist the Zeus-like ***CHUCK BLAZER*** *in his quest to wrest the U.S. television rights to the World Cup from NBC.*

By then, Skipper had a young family. His wife, Jessica, and their two boys, Nick and Clay, lived in Wilton, Conn., halfway between Manhattan and Bristol. Skipper triangulated his time among Seattle, New York City and Wilton—until that fateful day in 2000 when Skipper's triangle became a rectangle. His boss, Disney chairman Michael Eisner, added London to his monthly itinerary.

Eisner himself had flown to England to consider buying the London soccer team Queens Park Rangers, as a companion to the Disney-owned Anaheim Mighty Ducks of the NHL and Anaheim Angels of Major League Baseball. Instead, Eisner bought a soccer website in London, Soccernet.com, and told Skipper that it was now part of his digital purview. Skipper knew nothing about soccer beyond "coaching" his boys with other dads back in Wilton, but nevertheless made the first of his monthly visits to the U.K., where, to his everlasting surprise, he became Hugh Grant in a turn-of-the-century

Before he discovered soccer and his beloved ***JUST-RIGHT*** *Spurs, Skipper and Hunter S. Thompson roughhoused at* Rolling Stone.

rom-com. Instead of falling in love with Julia Roberts in Notting Hill, he fell hard for football in other lyrical London precincts: Fulham, Islington, Chelsea.

WHAT DID he love about football? For starters, everything. He loved England's decaying stadiums (he called them "grounds"), loved their Victorian facades concealing immaculate fields ("pitches"), loved that everything and everyone in English football—from Craven Cottage to Crystal Palace—had a name straight from Harry Potter.

He learned the game's rich new vernacular—British broadcasters declaiming about clubs and crests and perfectly weighted passes—and became one of those Americans who say "nil" instead of "zero" and "top of the table" instead of "first place". He steeped himself in the burgeoning canon of English football literature—*Fever Pitch*, *Among the Thugs*—even as the English Lit major recognized, in the second half of the name Tottenham Hotspur, a Shakespearean protagonist: Harry Hotspur, slain by Prince Hal in *Henry IV, Part 1*.

When his Soccernet staff insisted he choose a favorite club, Skipper chose Spurs the way Goldilocks chose porridge. Chelsea was too posh, Arsenal too obvious, Man United too successful and West Ham "too dangerous." These clubs and their grounds and their century-long histories were brand-new to him, an unexplored continent of characters, lore, chants and traditions. He would discover the game the way a child does, from scratch.

Fittingly, Soccernet was started by a child. In the mid-1990s, 12-year-old Tom Hadfield of Brighton, England,

John Skipper

first encountered the internet at his friend Rupert's house and began corresponding with strangers around the world who asked him the results of English soccer games. He started a website with his father, Greg, to provide a burgeoning audience with scores and injury news at a time when Manchester United results didn't run in U.S. newspapers and matches didn't air on American TV. Father and son sold Soccernet to the U.K.'s *Daily Mail*, which sold it to Disney, which was housed in the shadow of the Hammersmith Flyover, an elevated stretch of the A4 motorway.

Under Skipper, Soccernet retained a 12-year-old's spirit, at once a labor of love and an engine of commerce, suffused by a little boy's enchantment with the game. When Skipper arrived, the office was as male as a monastery. "They were all blokes, they all drank, they all dressed sloppy, and they all loved football," he recalls. "I mean, they *loved* football."

Quickly, so did he. There were two historic grounds in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham: Fulham's Craven Cottage and Chelsea's Stamford Bridge. He planned his monthly visits to London around the fixtures schedule. He attended around 15 matches a year and evangelized with the zeal of the newly converted. What's more, Skipper was convinced he could make his countrymen love this game nearly as much as he did and break the Premier League in America the way another group of Brits had done on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, on that magenta RCA Victor, in his boyhood home in North Carolina 40 years earlier.

SOON, SKIPPER would have the power to do just that. In 2005, Mark Shapiro resigned as head of content at ESPN. And though Skipper had no production experience in TV, he wanted to add the medium to his already full plate. He prepared a pitch for the vacant job that involved a seismic shift in strategy.

ESPN president George Bodenheimer invited Skipper to make that pitch on a Boston Whaler, on Long Island Sound, on a windy Saturday. The two men drank beer. When it came time for Skipper to make his case for promotion, he produced a dozen pages of notes on yellow legal paper. A sudden gust blew across the bow, and Skipper's pitch was carried away in the wind.

He didn't need his notes. He told Bodenheimer his vision to abandon original programming—including made-for-TV movies and Saturday morning aerobics—and focus on live sports, whose rights were expensive but whose rewards were potentially astronomical.

John Skipper

In this way, too, he hoped to Trojan-horse into the United States a steady diet of international football. Bodenheimer wondered aloud why America would suddenly care about soccer when historically it hadn't. "George, come to a game," Skipper pleaded. And though he didn't—"George is an American tackle football guy"—he listened. "It's the greatest spectator sport in the world," Skipper told him.

"When Skipper wanted to chase his passion for soccer and the World Cup," Bodenheimer recalled, "I immediately gave him permission."

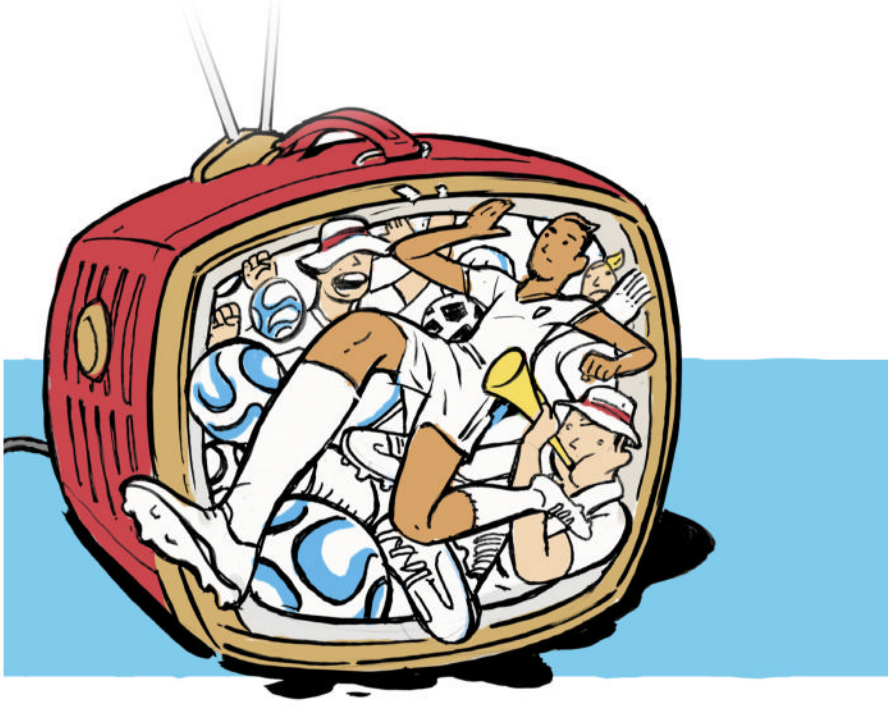
SKIPPER GOT the job on Oct. 6, 2005, giving him 27 days to persuade FIFA to award ESPN the U.S. television rights to the 2010 and 2014 World Cups. Before flying to Zurich, he had dinner with Major League Soccer commissioner Don Garber, who was eager to secure the league's first television rights fee. To that point, ESPN and ABC had paid no money to the league and simply split the ad revenue. Skipper knew NBC was loath to televise MLS as a prerequisite to get the World Cup. The two men dined at Shun Lee, a dim sum palace near the ABC building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The place whose chef claims to have invented General Tso's chicken would be cradle to another American-international fusion—of world football and U.S. television—if Skipper could get himself to Switzerland immediately. The clock was ticking, and it was enormous.

In Zurich, the home of FIFA, Skipper and two colleagues washed up at the Hotel Storchen, a Wes Anderson confection opened in 1357 that looks out across the Limmat River to a city of steeples, striped awnings and secret bank accounts. Looming over the "Hotel Stork," on the tower of St. Peter's, was the biggest church clock face in all of Europe, 28½ feet in diameter, its golden hands counting—with precision Swiss timing and a symphony of bells—every hour that FIFA's president refused to meet with Skipper. *Deign* was the word Skipper used: Sepp Blatter "didn't *deign*" to see him. Blatter was a potentate, the most powerful man in the world's most popular sport, and meeting with the newly empowered American TV executive was somehow beneath his dignity.

To friends, Skipper would come to call Sepp Blatter by a nickname, "Septic Bladder," with its double barrel of scatological implications. But he endured these small indignities for one reason: He wanted to spread the gospel of soccer to its last heathen outpost, the United States. Installed at the Storchen, Skipper hoped to emulate the nesting bronze stork on the hotel's exterior and fly home with a bundle of joy: the rights to broadcast World Cups to an audience of sports fans who were historically agnostic to, or openly contemptuous of, soccer.

"What can you say about soccer other than it is boring, tedious, confusing, mystifying, bewildering and virtually impossible to watch," wrote one of them, an Alabama newspaper columnist named Paul Finebaum, on the occasion of the previous World Cup, in 2002. In time, Finebaum would be paid for his punditry by ESPN. If the network couldn't convert every American to love world football as much as Skipper did, at least ESPN would have its soccer critics where Lyndon Johnson liked to have his: inside the tent pissing out, rather than outside the tent pissing in.

SKIPPER COULD never be certain if he had the support of that parrot-shouldered soccer macher with the quintessential surname for an international sports official: Blazer. On Fifth Avenue, Queens native Chuck Blazer straddled his Rascal scooter like Alexander the Great astride his elephant. In his role as deputy secretary of the Concacaf, the North American and Caribbean confederation of FIFA, Blazer kept offices on the entire 17th floor of Trump Tower, layers of atmosphere below his 49th floor condo. To Skipper, Blazer suggested he made his fortune as inventor of the yellow smiley face icon. "That's mine," Blazer said, showing him the smiley face on a Post-It note in Trump Tower, where he rented a separate apartment, at $6,000 a month, for his cats.



And so Skipper lobbied Niclas Ericson, then FIFA's director of TV. From Zurich, he traveled by train to Zug, one of the world's wealthiest hubs, an international tax haven, where he promised Ericson he would leverage ESPN's myriad channels to televise every single match of the World Cups live, something no other suitor could

reasonably do. Skipper didn't say that some of those matches might air at 3 a.m. on ESPN News. But they would be live. NBC, he noted, had aired some Olympic events on tape delay and called them "plausibly live."

In the end, it wasn't Skipper's promise to televise every match as it unfolded that won the day. He did what FIFA respected most: He showed them the money. ESPN paid $40 million for the 2010 World Cup, and $60 million for the 2014 World Cup. Had he wildly overpaid? The figure certainly sounded extravagant. He still affects a Dr. Evil accent when he says: "We paid—count it—one hundred *million* dollars."

Even for the Walt Disney Company, this was a significant outlay. The 2006 World Cup, by comparison, was already scheduled to air on ESPN for the princely sum of nothing. Those rights had been purchased years earlier by the marketing arm of MLS, which would produce the games and air them on ESPN in exchange for the ad revenue.

Before he could televise the 2010 World Cup on ESPN, Skipper doubled down, acquiring the rights to broadcast the English Premier League on ESPN2 in the United States, on Saturday mornings, when the network's programming leaned heavily into fishing. In 2009, the Premier League began airing on Saturday mornings at 7:30 Eastern, creating a new time slot for live sports in America. A growing niche of soccer-mad Yanks ate it up, with beans and toast. The peculiarly American cliché that soccer is boring finally had a riposte: not as boring as *watching men fish*.

AMERICAN SOCCER fans, starved and scarved, had a ravenous appetite for international football. The 2010 World Cup final between Spain and the Netherlands, live from Johannesburg, aired at 2:30 p.m. in New York. Andrés Iniesta scored four minutes before the final whistle to give Spain a 1–0 win. It was the most watched men's soccer game to that point in U.S. history, with 15.45 million viewers on ABC and another 8.821 million viewers on Spanish-language Univision. "The 2010 World Cup," Bodenheimer would write years later, "proved that big events can transform companies."

CHUCK BLAZER, it turns out, did not make his fortune from the smiley face emoji. Rather, he had pocketed bribes and kickbacks for years in his role at Concacaf, and failed to pay personal income tax on his ill-gotten fortune, eventually turning federal informant in the corruption scandal that engulfed FIFA in 2015, when Blatter resigned.

Blazer died in 2017, the same year Skipper would resign as president of ESPN. Skipper had, he said, long been a recreational user of cocaine but insisted it had never affected his work. But when someone from whom he bought the drug tried that December to extort him—and by extension the Walt Disney Company—he had little choice but to surrender the job he loved. He later cofounded Meadowlark, a media company that produces documentaries and podcasts, and took a small ownership stake in Triestina, in Serie C, the third tier of professional football in Italy, which he is quick to note is even less glamorous than it sounds.

It's a far cry from that day in South Africa when Skipper watched with fascination the respective entourages of Blatter and former U.S. President Bill Clinton square off at the 2010 World Cup over which group would be the first to exit a VIP room at the Loftus Versfeld Stadium in Pretoria. Clinton and his entourage won.

That was June 23, 2010, at the U.S.-Algeria match, which Skipper watched with the crowd, not the VIPs, flanked by his son Clay and ESPN's head of security. In the moments after Landon Donovan scored his 91st-minute match winner that allowed the U.S. to advance to the knockout stage—perhaps the most important goal in U.S. men's soccer history—the forward exhorted the American fans in attendance.

"I am taking the liberty of believing he pointed to where we were sitting," Skipper says of Donovan. The TV executive knew this electric moment was appearing on screens across America, in homes and in bars, on laptops and on smartphones, at noon in New York City and at 9 a.m. in L.A. He was in two worlds, 10 time zones apart. "And I thought," Skipper says, "everything was worth it." □

Skipper promised to ***TELEVISE EVERY MATCH*** *of the World Cup live. He didn't say that some of those might air at 3 a.m. on ESPN News.*

FAMILY AFFAIR
Even with her MS diagnosis, Elsa has been with Fernando and his brother Alberto (far left) on every stop of their football—and life—journeys.

POINT AFTER

A TEAM EFFORT

"YOU HAVE A FUTURE THAT'S SO BRIGHT AND A HEART THAT'S SO FULL. MY GENTLE GIANT. MY DARLING SON. MY BUDDY. MY TEAMMATE. I BELIEVE IN YOU WITH EVERY PART OF ME."

ELSA MENDOZA *The Players' Tribune, Dec. 11, 2025*

THE NFL DRAFT is a celebratory moment for hundreds of young men. And, it's worth remembering as we approach Mother's Day, for their moms too. Fernando Mendoza *(page 22)* has spoken eloquently about how important and impactful his mother, Elsa—who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis nearly 20 years ago—has been in his journey to the top of this year's class. Every player-parent relationship is unique, but some version of that story has played out for virtually all prospects whose names will be called in Pittsburgh.

Before Mendoza was named the Heisman Trophy winner last December, Elsa wrote an open letter to her son, published on *The Players' Tribune*, congratulating him and reflecting on what had led their family to that point. It's worth revisiting as we look toward the draft and the celebration of all moms in May. Not every kid can be a No. 1 pick, but the message will resonate with mothers and athletes everywhere.

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